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THE OVERLAND TRAIL



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ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT THE GUARDS NEVER TOOK THEIR EYES
OFF THEM

THE OVERLAND TRAIL

A Tale of '49

BY

REGINALD WRIGHT KAUFFMAN

Author of

*The Ranger of the Susquehannock, Spanish
Dollars, Seventy-Six, etc.*

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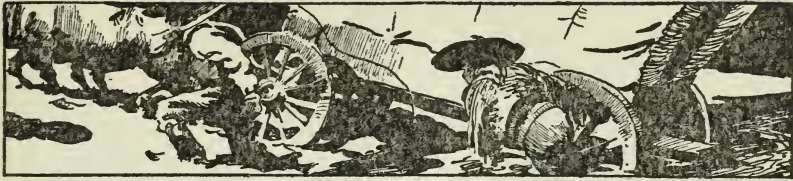


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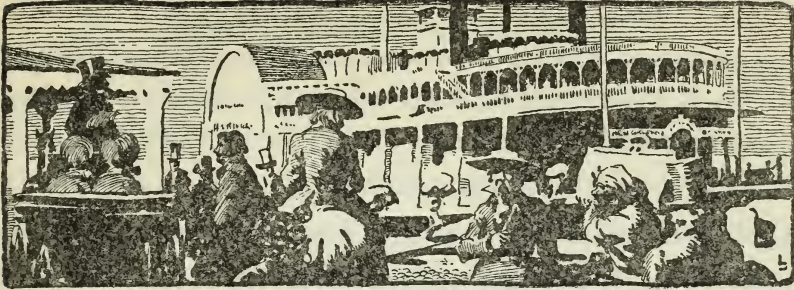
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CHAPTER I

ABOARD "THE MISSISSIPPI BELLE"



THAT first time I noticed the Indian, he was over by the labbard rail — not leaning against it, like a white man would, but standing straight — and studying the New Orleans levee as if it was just his own redwoods, two thousand miles away. He never turned a hair then, nor yet a minute afterwards when Aaron Acker poked a derringer against his flat stomach and started to pull the trigger.

The Mississippi Belle was fair black with travellers. I'd right away got the adventure-tingle that I always got on a river-steamer.

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There were most all kinds of people aboard — stove-pipe hats and slouches and mangy straws hanging over barefoot men's heads umbrella-fashion — everybody with a quid in his mouth and puffing whiskey-breaths that a spark would have set a-fire: up-stream barge-men, full of hog and hominy, who'd poled their keel-boats down here, sold 'em, and then took deck-passage — which is what you might call steerage — home. There were slaves and slavers; professional gamblers looking for suckers and pretending not to — trash who lived always on the water; there was one trapper from Bayou Meto, out in Arkansas, who'd brought along a chained brown bear — and then there were the fellows just back from California or just heading west.

Talking to the Indian at first was a short, stocky man, mighty rough. His soft hat had a hole through it that you wondered how i' had come there, and he didn't wear any coat — only a blue flannel shirt and dirty pants stuffed in his old boots. His cheeks were brick red above his gray whiskers, and so were his eyes, pretty nearly.

“Till this yhere boat starts, you stand hitched,” he was

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saying. "Ef you move it'll be heap bad medicine. Dang ef it won't."

Then he walked off — to the bar, I reckon, where a lot of the passengers were guzzling or gassing or a little of both — and I had my look at the Indian.

Well, the only one I'd ever seen till then who came up to specifications: that's what he was. Mr. Fenimore Cooper's *Leather Stocking* yarns weren't hardly six years old, as a lot, and I'd read them all — and then I'd go to some herb-doctor's concert and not see anything except a couple of low-down creatures with no more spirit than a nigger's dog.

I'd grown 'most to be so I wondered if Chingachook and Magua and those fellows weren't all manufactured lies; but here stood somebody who might be Uncas himself. He was fine and handsome and young — not much older than me — tight-lipped, proud, and held his head up high; slim; stood about five-foot-eight in his moccasins, I judge. Of course, he didn't wear any war-paint or an eagle's feather; but his clothes were made out of tanned buckskin. Right away, I wanted to look for the tattooed token of the Royal Delawares.

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A deckhand came by. I asked him:

“How did that Indian get here?”

“Californy,” says the deckhand, careless-like: “his master brung him.”

California! That was the magic word in those days. There wasn't a novel I used to smouch and read at Monsieur Derbigny's Ponchartrain Academy — not even *The Three Musketeers* — could stir me up the way the name of California could. No, nor none of all the other people on this steamboat — not even the pilot — made my heart thump like the folks from across the plains, neither.

Gold-dust fair filled the air then. You could smell it everywhere.

A whole lot had happened in the short while since February '48, when that workman, Marshall, while he was digging a mill-race, found gold on the land of Captain Sutter, twenty-five miles from New Helvetia on the American Fork. At first, everybody'd thought this news was only more of the general gold gossip that had been going the rounds for three hundred years; but,

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pretty soon, other finds backed up the first. A man took \$17,000 out of a little gully, and folks got to hear of it; one rumor was added to another. People said the average everywhere was two ounces a day, and they didn't whisper the news—and when Governor Mason's letter and the President's Message let us all know the talk was actually true, why, the whole country just went looney.

Up at my home, in Heliopolis, Missouri, ex-judge Minchen said—and later I read it myself in the New Orleans *Picayune*, too—that between December of '48 and the end of the next January, ninety-nine ships left United States ports with gold-hunters; a lot of prospectors crossed the Isthmus of Panama and went from there by boat; and just about now there was starting that big '49 rush of 80,000 souls from all over the Union—and a good half of these were going by horse and mule and ox-cart overland, over the prairies and across the Rockies and Sierras: what with buffaloes on the plains and mountain-lions in the high places, starvation, white desperadoes and red savages,

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the old Spanish Main was just a side-show compared with those miles and miles between Fort Dodge and the Sacramento Valley.

You can guess, then, how it made a fellow of seventeen feel to know he'd been looking at a real California miner — and was now face to face with a California Indian. I wanted to know if the miner'd made his pile — which meant, of course, dug, or washed, a fortune.

My deckhand friend didn't suppose so: "Don't look like he's got nothin' in the way o' val'able property, 'ceptin' this here aborigine. They call him a peon out there, but I 'low he ain't only plain slave in civilization."

It seemed a pity to me, this calling the Indian a slave did, for anybody could see he wasn't black — he was red. Still, I pretty soon noticed everybody else treated him like he belonged on the auction-block, and that was what made the trouble I'm going to tell about. After a bit, along sailed a white man who stopped directly in front of the savage.

"What right's a Injun got on this yhere deck?" he asks, looking clean through the red fellow.

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He was a skinny runt, that white man, with a long nose and sharp little eyes — black. He had a yellow face, and when he sneered, you saw his teeth were long and yellow, too; but he was togged out like a circus ringmaster — beaver hat, frock-coat, red velvet vest and plaid pantaloons that straps held fast to his patent-leather shoes.

I nudged the deckhand.

"And who's he?" I asked, for anybody could tell he thought he was something mighty important.

"Him? You long-legged, red-headed, freckled ignoramus! Don' you know?" — To hear that deckhand, a person would have believed General Zachary Taylor'd come aboard! — "Why, that there's Aaron Acker."

"What's Aaron Acker?"

"How you talk, chile! He ain't been aroun' fo' a coon's age, but he used to be 'mos' the bes'-knowed slave-trader up an' down the river — an' I reckon he's still the bigges' gambler."

The Indian hadn't answered Acker. He didn't even look at him: just stood there with his face toward the levee, like he was stone deaf. Some other folks, though,

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heard — even in the bustle and excitement of leaving that was going on — and they began to crowd up and chip in. Perhaps they knew who 'twas making this fuss. It's always safe to bet a bully'll get the support of any mob: that was the way now.

“ Since when's the Mississippi steamboats turned free soil? ” says somebody. “ Throw the buck out'n here! ”

“ That's the ticket! ” another one yells. “ John P. Hale an' George Julian an' them other abolitionists don' own Louisiana — yit! ”

And a square-headed party with a blondish beard and spectacles swelled himself and called: “ Dot's right — Amer'ca fer Amer'cuns! ”

Naturally, I was watching everything at once, and at the back of the crowd a hand went up, like somebody was trying to signal to the slaver. A head and neck followed that hand, and I got a glimpse of a man whose looks made my stomach heave. He had a goitre in his throat that big he couldn't button his shirt-collar around it; his cheeks were sunk and drawn and dough-colored, and his eyes stood out like saucers with red veins painted on them.

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"Aaron —" he begins, in a queer, hoarse sort of voice.

Acker whipped out his gun. He must have been a regular sleight-of-hand sharp, because one instant he wasn't holding a thing, and the next there he had a stumpy, large-bore pistol — a .41 — pushing right under the Indian's ribs.

"Now," says Acker, looking as if he owned the whole deck, "yo' march to where yo' b'long."

The crowd cheered, and the gambler stroked his moustache, which was short above the lips, but drooping at the sides. The Indian turned then, only he still wouldn't open his mouth: he just smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Up with yo' savage hands!" orders Acker. "Yo' yhear me?"

All the Indian did was to fold his arms across his buckskin coat.

"Cyan't yo' talk?" bellowed the slaver.

The Indian smiled and kind of shrugged his shoulders once more.

"Yo' kin walk, anyhow," says Acker. "Yo' ain't

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hobbled." He shoved his derringer deeper. "An' yo' gotta walk."

"He'd ought to be shot, mockin' a white man!" said some of the crowd, and at that they all began to say: "Shoot him!"

"I'm a-goin' to," Acker swears, with an ugly oath; and to the Indian: "Ef yo' don't move 'fore I count three, I'm a-goin' to bore daylight through yo' belly. Come along, now! One — two —"

I saw his index-finger tightening on the trigger.

"Aaron —"

That was the man with the goitre again, trying to give a warning: he'd been watching the door the miner'd gone through on his way to the bar. But the warning wasn't ever finished, for, back by the door, the gray-whiskered, red-faced miner comes, sure enough, and it didn't take the drawing of a breath for him to take in what was happening and to do something that strangled the rest of the words.

He pushed the goitre-fellow heels over tincup and threw his own stocky body head-first against the crowd. His arms, in their blue flannel sleeves, flayed a road

ABOARD "THE MISSISSIPPI BELLE"

right across the mob. Men fell back — some of 'em down — this side and that. Before Acker could have known anyone was coming up behind him, that California pioneer had shoved him away from the Indian and was standing between them — and there he had two guns: one in each hand.

“Mah name's Hanby Henderson,” roars the miner, “an' mah home's in the Kingdom o' Pike, an' I come yhere from the gold-fields. This yhere is mah peon — an' ef anybody don' want him aroun', they kin fight me!”



CHAPTER II

FALSE FRIENDS

DEATH was on deck, and we all thought sure it was going to strike; Hanby Henderson's face was red as a hot forge, his guns were ready. The fellow with the goitre plumb vanished; my friend from the crew ran like mad for the Captain — and about half the crowd ducked for cover. But that Indian at the rail, his arms still folded across his buckskin coat, didn't so much as budge — and I reckon Acker didn't dare to: his derringer had been knocked down, and he was twice covered.

He must have been as quick with his brains, though, as he was with his fingers. His yellow cheeks did turn pasty, and his moustache sort of twitched up on one.

FALSE FRIENDS

side till it showed his dog-teeth. Only that didn't last longer than a sneeze: he hid his scare and his anger — if it was anger. His sharp little eyes opened as wide as they could; he tucked his pistol back in its pocket and swept that beaver hat off his head all sleek with hair-oil.

“California?” he says — and I wish you could have seen his smile: it wasn't a bit sick; it was hearty. “Well,” says he, “I'd plain like to see myself fightin' anybody as hails from California. The men as goes there are carryin' the Constitution an' the flag into the wilderness. They're buildin' the Republic, an' it's the duty o' us stay-to-homes to honor 'em.”

Henderson kind of gaped, but he lowered his guns. Anybody could tell he was a simple soul, like most brave men.

“Uh?” he says.

Acker went right on: “An' a peon?” He nodded at that unmoving Indian. “Red? Why, jes' lookin' at him kind o' casual, I thought he had black blood in him.”

“Nary a drap,” the miner answered.

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“ Well, then,” said the slaver, “ Aaron Acker’s too much of a gen’man not to acknowledge his wrong when he’s done one — an’ apologize. Mister — Mister — I didn’t quite kitch the name? ”

“ It’s Henderson: Hanby Henderson.”

“ Mr. Henderson, suh, I bow to yuh. ” He did it, too —mighty low. “ An’ I offer yuh my sincerest apology. Thar! I reckon honor’s satisfied all ’roun’.” Acker turned to what was left of the crowd. “ Yo’-all yhear? ” he says, with a sweeping gesture and a scowl as if he challenged anyone who didn’t agree: “ We’ve been too quick on the trigger. This yhere gen-men’s one o’ the makers of America, an’ his servant’s a red peon — not a nigger slave.”

He’d got the crowd with him as tight now as he’d had it before: those fellows who’d been yelling for the poor Indian’s blood a minute ago cheered! He said to the miner:

“ Suh, will yo’ do me the honor to accept my hand — an’ a li’l’ refreshment? ”

And that was the end of it — for the time. The pair went away arm-in-arm and nobody laughed:

FALSE FRIENDS

everybody applauded. You might think we all took it too calm, but things happened like this, those days. The other passengers went on about their business, and I watched the start of *The Mississippi Belle* — \$250,000, boat and cargo.

A file of figures, gunny-sacks over their heads, went ashore after putting the last wood aboard.

“O, preachers, fold yo’ Bibles;
Prayer-makers, pray no mo’ —
Fo’ de las’ soul is converted
In dat great Gittin’-up Mornin’:
Fare you well; fare you well!” —

The nigger stevedores left the hold and stopped singing their “Spiritual” when they stopped their hauling. The black crew all went below; the rest of the hands filled the forecastle, and every passenger hurried toward the rails.

Clang — Clang!

Then the whistle. It drowned out the shouts of the regular regiment of people along the levee.

On the hurricane-deck stood the Captain, as stiff as a drum-major. Some men in red shirts waved flags,

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and the flag mounted the jack-staff. Steam hissed out of the 'scape-pipes; two streaks of black smoke — they managed that, to impress people, by throwing pitch-pine on the fires — coiled over the bright-colored chimneys. Away we went, winding between the other shipping and always coming as close to a collision as we could without colliding — just to prove how quick *The Mississippi Belle* 'd answer to her wheel.

And she had a right to be proud. Those days, the river-steamboats were likely the worst places between the Atlantic and the Rockies, as far as lots of their travellers were concerned; but the boats themselves were sort of heroic, their make-up just about palatial to a country-town boy fresh from a New Orleans academy, and this particular steamer was one of the handsomest.

I spent an hour or more, looking her over. She was long-built and keen. Her pair of high smokestacks were cutjagged, like crowns, and the gilt head of a woman the "Belle" of her name — hung between 'em: I thought, then, it was gold! Sun-rays were painted on the paddle-boxes, the guards were trimmed with filigree, and the texas, hurricane and boiler-decks were as

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clean as a whistle, and their railings white as clouds. I peeped in the Ladies' Cabin: Wilton carpet on the floor—the saloon had prism-draped chandeliers. It was only thirteen years since the first stateroom-steamer, *The Prairie*, sailed out of St. Louis, but here, not to mention the bridal-chamber, were rows and rows of cabins with two bunks in each (nobody shared my quarters, it happened), even if you did have to wash at the barber-shop.

Of course, the pilot was the most interesting thing to me: next to California pioneers and Colonel Frémont and Mexican War veterans, Mississippi pilots were the biggest men in the country; not even the Captain had any authority over them, once they were on their course.

They worked in pairs — “partners” they called them — two to a boat, watch-and-watch around the clock; they knew every inch of that all-the-time changing river in the dark, and the whole Valley was full of stories about their races and how, in a fire, this one or that — boys had their names as ready then as boys have the names of prize-fighters today — stood to his post and kept his craft against the shore until the last passenger escaped.

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So I went up to the texas and forward to the pilot-house.

It was a big thing, almost all glass, with windows open and their red tasselled curtains pulled back. There stood our director, sort of loafing over the wheel, bells and wire-pulls all around him, and behind, on a fine leather sofa, sat a couple of visiting pilots — plug-hats, diamond pins and kid gloves — swapping river gossip and spitting tobacco-juice into polished cuspidors six good feet away. They were mighty accurate shots, those visitors, and I watched them for a long time waiting for one of 'em to miss, but never catching him.

“Six mile point,” says one. “You ought to do twelve an hour now, Jim, till you get through slack water.”

I believe I must have hung around there most of the afternoon, listening, and watching the flat shoreline slip past, where the trees were bearded with Spanish moss, ghostly — and the yellow stream and the towheads, which are baby islands that grow fast. We'd stop at a tiny town — the big event of the day for it — run out a plank, trot over some traveller or freight, back out,

FALSE FRIENDS

straighten, take a great breath and then puff on again, fair majestic. It was as good as a show to me, but, a little after supper, a storm suddenly blew along, and the torrent of rain drove me below.

I was going along a corridor when I heard loud voices. One of 'em says:

“Aw, come on; that ain't nothin'! Yo' mos' mote as well say two bits. I raise yuh, the way I said I would — raise yuh five dollars. Thar ain't no limit as I knows on.”

Right in front of me — I remember its number: 22 — a cabin-door hung part open, so's to get some air on the tobacco-smoke, I judge. Anyhow, blue rings of it swayed and eddied from the ceiling to the floor, and, in the middle of the room, Acker and the goitre-man sat at a table with Hanby Henderson, with the Indian, arms folded, back of him. The whites were having a game of poker — a pretty nigh cut-throat game, from all the signs. A bottle and some glasses stood at the side, and there was a heap of money in the middle, and some in front of each player, but mighty little was at the prospector's place.

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“ I’ll call that raise, ” says he.

A hanging lamp lit the cabin: if ever I needed a lesson about the way gambling’ll bring out what’s worst in man, I got it then — plain “ brute ” was written all over those fellows. Aaron’s back was to me, but it somehow seemed like the slickness and imitation-gentlemanliness had seeped out of him; the goitrous man’s eyes popped a lot more malignant-like than when I saw them last, their veins nearly bursting, and his lips were drawn up the way a dog’s are when it’s got a mind to steal another dog’s bone; and poor Henderson, cheeks redder than ever, held his cards with chills-and-fever fingers. It wasn’t hard to tell who’d been losing steady, and I was only easier in my feelings when I noticed they’d all thrown their guns on to the lower bunk; still, I had a presentiment that something ugly might be going to happen soon — so I didn’t move on.

“ There, ” says Hanby, all trembly and on fire, and laid down his cards, face up. “ Queens over tens. ”

The door jamb partly hid me from the two professionals, and Henderson was too excited over his bad luck to look away from the board. The Indian must

FALSE FRIENDS

have known I was there, only he never moved a muscle.

Acker was out of that hand. "No good: three little 'uns," says the other gambler, and raked in the pile.

Bang!

A tremendous thunder-clap came from outside, and a streak of lightning. Through the port, I had a flash of the river looking like lead, except for its white-caps. Those players, though: it might have been a dead calm, for all they cared.

"That hand aboot cleans me out," Henderson said. He shoved back his chair.

"Oh," said Acker, very soft, but not a bit the dandy gentleman, just the same, "yo' 've got to git yo' revenge."

The other player chipped in with his hoarse voice: "He shore does. We'll jes' try a round o' jackpots — an' then quit."

They began that, but you could see it wasn't any revenge for Hanby. He kept on losing, and all the time that thunder-storm raged along like a battle: we'd tied up for it to the east bank, and, in the flashes, I could

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see out how the trees were bent away down under by the wind and the rain, with their leaves shivering at each stroke. Acker won on his own deal, and the man with the goitre on Henderson's.

"I ain't never seed nothin' like it," says Hanby.

The goitre-man was dealing. They all went in and drew cards, and the dealer came out on top: two high pairs against little ones.

"That's all, anyhow." Henderson was already on his feet; his gray head was in the blue-gray smoke-clouds.

"Thar's the ramdoozle to play," Acker said. "Everybody up ten dollars — an' ten to draw."

Hanby laughed: I knew all at once what folks meant by "bitter laughter." — "Yo' mote as well ask fo' a thousand."

"Busted?" said the goitre-man, grinning.

"Clean."

"Didn't bring much back from them gold-fields."

"Not much in cash, I didn't. I'm busted, anyhow."

"Yo' mean yo' 're skeert," says Acker, with a sneer in his tone.

FALSE FRIENDS

Henderson's bushy eyebrows drew together, and he made half a reach toward the guns. "Yo' fellers be keerful — an' remember what nigh happened to yuh on deck today."

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"Well," Acker says, taunting, "yo' ain't broke."

"Call me a liar?"

"Ain't yo' got yo' Indian? Yo' tell us he's yourn — even ef he is a peon. Ef yo' want fo' to show yo' ain't afeared o' the kyards" — Aaron was flipping the pack between his fingers, just at the table-edge — "put him up ag'in' five hundred from this gen'man' an' five hundred from me: no other bets; but everybody gits a draw."

Henderson rubbed a hand across his face. Then, partly fuddled, but the gambling-fire coming back into his eyes, he looked at the Indian: the Indian looked over everybody's heads.

The lightning cracked at the window. The wind howled.

"Yo' stand to win a thousand, mister," says the goitre man.

"Ef yo' ain't afeared," says Aaron. "But yo' are."

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Down comes Hanby's big right fist on the table, making the glasses jump and upsetting the empty bottle, just as the next one of the storm's thunder-cannons shot off outside and sent a streak of white light across the port. "I'll show yuh who's skeert!" he swore, and plumped back in his chair. "Go on an' deal!"

I held my breath, but leaned away into the cabin. The Indian was a statue. The two professional gamblers counted their stakes and shoved them into the middle of the table; Acker took a couple of blank bills-of-sale, or some such papers, out of his frock-coat's breast-pocket, wrote on one of 'em in pencil, got Henderson to put a shaky signature to it, then threw it among the bills and gold.



CHAPTER III

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

NOW, I don't want you to think about me as a steady hanger-on around river-steamboats and used to watching poker-games. Of course I wanted to go to California, or, if I couldn't, I wanted to be a Mississippi pilot: every American boy was like that, then, and it's true those were rough times; but there were plenty of decent folks living in them, and mine were respectable — what was left of them, which is to say, my mother and me. Still, to prove this, I'd better tell you right here how I came to be where I was; and, anyway, you can't understand my joining the gold-rush afterwards, and why some people thought it worth their while risking their own lives to kill me, and the mystery

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of the Pomo Claim — you can't understand the half that's coming unless I do a little explaining first.

Well, then, my mother was Rhoda Rowntree Frost, and my father was Thomas J. Frost: the grandson, through his mother, of that South Carolina Lieutenant Pinckney that you've maybe read about ¹ and that settled in Pennsylvania after the Revolution. These Frosts, my parents, moved to Kentucky while it was really "The Dark and Bloody Ground" which the Indians had called it; and later on again, to Heliopolis, Missouri. They brought with them my mother's two elder brothers, canny Uncle Charley and Uncle Roger Rowntree, who was supposed to be the family black sheep, but he kind of drifted off, and we hadn't ever heard any more from him for years and years; and, afterwards, Uncle Charley died, and soon after him, my father, too.

He left a pretty good estate, my father, and I was sent — just the tall, red-haired and freckled fellow the deck hand called me — to M. Derbigny's Ponchartrain Academy in New Orleans, as you know; but whenever I got home on vacation, I somehow wasn't happy about

¹ See "'SEVENTY-SIX!" in "The Rowntree Chronicles."

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

what was going on there. The will had made ex-Judge Minchen — we called him just “Judge” — executor and trustee, and it looked to me like he got a fair lot more out of it than the heirs did. My mother’s head was as level as her heart was brave; only, she’d have considered it kind of disloyal to my father’s memory for her to doubt a man her husband had trusted and appointed, the way he’d trusted and appointed the Judge, and as for me, I didn’t know a mite about business — so all I could do was worry and keep quiet.

Matters drifted along till here, the other day. I was at school, and in comes M. Derbigny, shaking his kindly gray head. My mother’d written him a letter, enclosing one for me: investments had gone wrong and that estate had shrunk to ’most nothing — the Judge held a mortgage on our house and the bit of land left around it — he’d lost his own money, he said, in the same ventures he lost ours in, and he was afraid he’d have to foreclose. Anyway, I must leave Ponchartrain Academy in the middle of my course and come home.

So I took passage on *The Mississippi Belle* the very next day. I’ve told you what followed that — and here

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I was by the door to Aaron Acker's cabin, with the boat steaming along toward Heliopolis, but meantime with me watching a pair of slick gamblers, desperate men, who were meaning to fleece that big, strong, simple miner, Hanby Henderson.

Outside, the thunder rumbled some longer, but it was farther away now. The storm was dying down, and I could feel the throb of the engines: we'd cast loose and were on our way again.

Acker shuffled the cards, deft and quick. "Cut," he says, as if he didn't care whether he won or lost. And when the pack was cut, he kind of palmed it—and then he dealt.

He took his hand and lolled back, careless. The goitre-man got his cards together close and began slowly bending up a bit of one after the other, just peeping at each corner out of his pop-eyes. Henderson grabbed his all of a bunch, stared unbelieving—but let out a laugh a lot different from the laugh he'd given a couple of minutes ago.

"Draw," says Aaron, coming back to business. "How many cards?"

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The second gambler took two.

“I don’t want none,” chuckled Hanby Henderson, as happy as a boy that’s won a prize at school. “This yhere’s good enough.” There was regular triumph in the way he said it.

“No?” says Aaron, all silky again, and I didn’t fancy that silkiness. “Well, ef that’s so, I got to take jes’ one.”

Everything was still. The storm was over.

Quick, Acker flicked a card out of his hand among the money and things, and with a middle finger snapped its substitute toward him from the top of the pack. Henderson couldn’t look away from his own hand, but I noticed the man with the goitre was staring mighty anxious at Aaron, and so I stared, too: that snapped card flew past his other fist and into his lap.

Now, when I craned my neck I could see his lap, and nobody else could, except it was the Indian — and I saw something that even I could understand. I saw Acker make a stealthy little movement of his left leg that sent the runaway piece of pasteboard on to the floor,

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while he drew out a second card that he'd kept hidden under his knee.

“Ready?” shouts Hanby.

The other fellows nodded.

“A straight!” laughs Henderson. “Lookee: seven to the jack!”

He threw down his hand. He reached for the stakes.

“That's good here,” says the man with the goitre. “Only three of a kind.”

“Wait a minute,” Aaron kind of coos to Hanby. “Wait a minute, my frien'. The pot's mine — an' the Indian. Take a look at this yhere flush.” And down went the hand I'd seen him stack: all hearts.

I can't tell you why I did what I did, for it certainly hadn't yet become my affair, but maybe it was because I never could stand cheating anywhere or anyhow: I just know I wasn't afraid. Those words were hardly out of Acker's mouth when I made a dive into the cabin and under the table — and came up, holding the card he'd dumped there: a trey of clubs.

“Here's what he drew!” I yelled. — “And it don't

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match! What he filled his flush with was one he'd been sitting on!"

I said that — but I didn't get to say any more. All the players jumped at once, and each let out a different sort of howl — Hanby's, just anger — Acker's, spite — the goitre-man's a hoarse warning. Henderson threw out his big arms and made two grabs at the same instant: for the money and the guns. Then the man with the goitre got a hold of the arm headed for the revolvers, and Aaron reached out and grabbed the one that was reaching into the stakes.

I saw that Hanby hadn't closed on anything except his bill-of-sale. At the same moment, Acker's loose fist yanked a knife from under his vest. As he raised it to strike the miner, he let me have his knuckles on my chin. I tumbled backward; the other gambler kicked the table right over on top of me, and somebody — it must have been the Indian-peon — fetched a whack at the lamp with a pillow. After that, everything was darkness and stamping feet.

It gave me the fantods! I rolled for the door and into the hall and then — for all I was worth — I ran for help.

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The decks were empty, for it was very late. When I didn't find anybody right to hand, my thought wasn't of the Captain, but of the man whose position made him a hero to me: the pilot. I fair flew up to the texas, wondering if I'd be in time to prevent murder being done down there below.

A couple of dim stars had come out in the sky, which was otherwise still pretty black, but of course there was plenty of light where I was going. I ran along at top speed, and never knew before how far that deck stretched fore and aft, or how high it was above the river. It seemed I might have been racing over a mountain table-land; I was blown and breathless when at last I came to the end of it.

“Git out o' here!”

The pilot was alone now. He was bending over his wheel. He was nigh too startled by my impudence to be angry at first.

“There's — there's — ” I panted.

He pointed to some printed things framed on the wall. “Them's the rules. Will you git out o' my wheelhouse, or will I kick you out?”

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“There’s a man being knifed in cabin 22!” I said, all in a breath.

That pilot had a red beard; he let off a stream of tobacco-juice through it. Even yet, I can hear it smack the inside of the farthest cuspidor.

“An’, my young friend, there’s a sand-bar a hundred yards ahead o’ us,” says he, all of a sudden quiet and easy. “Expect me to leave my wheel to git some passenger out’n a scrape? I ain’t a policeman, boy: I’m a pilot. You run along and talk to the Captain. He’s the man for your money.”

Of course it had been silly for me to bother a Mississippi pilot with a mere murder — trying to get away from his duties a man that earned as much as anywhere from \$125 to \$250 a month, barring his board and keep. You might say I fell down from there: couldn’t have managed to ’ve gone much quicker if he had kicked me. At that, though, I naturally didn’t find the Captain — found nobody except the mate, and it took a fair long while to find him.

Still, he did what I wanted: a lumbering giant, with the shoulders of an ox and the arms of a blacksmith.

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Like I've said, fights weren't much shucks on those boats; but, after all, for a mate, a killing's a killing anywhere, and my news set this fellow into a roar.

"Cabin 22, you say, eh?" He drew a gun as long as my arm, but I don't believe that made me jump near as high as the way he swore did: if he'd reared himself to decent talk, I do reckon he'd have been an orator. "Murder on *The Belle*? I'll murder 'em!"

He rolled away, and I after him. Fast.

The door of 22 was closed and locked. He gave it a prodigious kick, without even taking the trouble to knock. It shook, but held tight.

"Hi!" he called, hard enough to wake a corpse. "Open up here!"

But he didn't wait to be obeyed. He just put a big shoulder under the knob and gave an upward heave — and the door flew wide.

Pitch black — and as quiet as a grave!

I stood where I'd stopped, too scared to budge: I was afraid everybody was dead in there, and I might fall over their bodies. The mate, though, he didn't care what

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he fell over: he was half across the stateroom with one single jump.

Acker's silky voice sang out: "Who's that? What yo' mean distractin' a gen'man's beauty-sleep?"

The lamp was pretty well smashed, but somebody lit a candle: the fellow with the goitre. In the faint light, his eyes bulged plumb horrible.

I'll never forget the picture: those eyes — Aaron, all sallow, lying in a bunk (oh, lying more ways than one!) — the mate in the middle beside the replaced table, his navy-revolver in his hand and his sleeves rolled high (he'd a red-and-blue anchor_tattooed six inches above each wrist) — and nobody else! There wasn't a sign of Hanby or the Indian, and all that stateroom was as clean and neat as if the people that were in it had just that minute come aboard.



CHAPTER IV

WHO'LL WIN?

THEY laughed me out of it — Acker and his partner did — just plumb laughed me out of it. Said I'd mistaken a little card-dispute among friends for something serious — said that the mate and I could go to Henderson's cabin and ask him. Nothing harmed except the lamp and Aaron'd pay for that in the morning. And then of course the mate got so mad at me for giving a false alarm and stirring him up so's he'd broke that lock (which he supposed he'd have to pay for out of his wages) that he went for me, and I ran pell-mell for my own stateroom and shut myself in.

All that meant that nobody bothered any more about

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Henderson. As for me, I was ashamed, but I was somehow suspicious, too, and I didn't sleep much for what was left of the night: I still half-believed those gamblers had killed Hanby and his peon and maybe thrown their bodies in the river. Right soon after sun-up, I hunted around till I found the miner's quarters — a cabin-boy told me where they were at last — and I knocked there.

Henderson's voice answered me — no mistaking it — and asked who 'twas. I explained. I thought then he'd be sure to open up but he didn't — just called with his gruff voice through the door:

“Well, Reddy, I'm mighty obleeged to yuh fo' what yo' done las' night — goin' to do somethin' fo' you, too, right soon. But I kin't let yuh in yhere jes' now: me an' mah peon's tinkerin' over a private job.”

That set me back considerable. I fired hot at his thinking I was after any reward, and still hotter to find out the gamblers were right after all — I mean that, as far as any serious knifing was concerned, I'd made a fool of myself. I stood there for a while, then I just sneaked away. There didn't seem anything left for me to do except go on about my own business; the sooner

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I could forget my false alarm, the sooner I'd be comfortable in my mind, so I decided to put in the day loafing around the boat.

That's what I did, too. A while, I'd watch the wide, brown river, and the low-lying towns, here and there, asleep on each bank, the china-trees, or the canebrakes and woods I knew must be alive with 'coon and 'possum; and a while I'd listen to the passengers' talk.

A lot of that was niggers and sugar, molasses and politics: the kind of gas I was used to, and that droned on in your ears without making much impression; but there were a few men as fresh back from California as Hanby — sun-baked heroes, they looked to me — and these were being pumped by the lot headed west, with still other folks hanging on the outskirts offering no-account suggestions. The Wild West: if I hadn't been much of a d'Artagnan, I might be a Natty Bumppo yet — I might be like Kit Carson that we boys heard so much about, these days! My ears gulped it all:

“There's a Mexican named Vaca, thirty mile' out'n Fort Sutter: with four men in four days, he got seventeen pound' o' gold. . . .”

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“Major Cooper, he had only two men an’ a boy to help him, an’ he cleaned up a thousand dollars’ worth in his first couple o’ days. . . .”

“Shucks, that ain’t nothin’! Me an’ Norris, we split three thousand in that time: ef yo’ don’ believe me, here’s my share. . . .”

“Kit Carson, yo’ say? Me, I seen him often, slim, sandy-haired, nothin’ to look at twic’t, but when it come to bein’ the scout, I’d trust my skin to him anywhere in the hull wilderness. And gold! Didn’t he bring it all the way from Sutter’s Fort east to show the folks?” . . .

Like that, it went on for hours. They said, if men’d join together in companies and dam the California rivers and divert them, they’d find the old bottoms chuck full of ledges of broken gold: nothing needed but to scoop it up.

And it wasn’t only the dust or quartz that would make you rich. It seemed like a body couldn’t cross over the Sierras without stumbling over wealth — if they could cross ’em at all. You’d get any prices you like provided you took out goods and opened up a store: woollen shirts, flannel underwear, blankets, Holland-cloth overcoats,

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soap, pipes, kitchen things; Flemish knives, hatchets, shovels and picks — people were making so much money they'd pay whatever you asked; or you could go to work for somebody else: wages were skyhigh. It wasn't long before last night dropped out of my head; it wasn't a lot longer before I quit worrying about mother and the investments that'd gone wrong.

Why shouldn't I go west and make enough to buy back all she'd lost — yes, and take out mortgages on everything Judge Minchen had in the world? The Call of the Coast was echoing all over America then, but it was never anywhere louder than that day on *The Mississippi Belle*, and it filled my head to the brim: that lure of distances and dangers and new lands and gold.

The only breaks were for food and drink, or when we touched somewhere. Everybody'd stop everything and go to see that. Two strokes of a bell, close together, and we'd all be at the rail on the shore-side before the third sounded.

“Stabboard lead! . . . Mark three! . . . Quarter less. . . .”

There'd be a tiny town ahead of it, with its whole

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population, including the cats and dogs, come to see. A jangle, down in the engine-room. Slow! Out goes the gangplank — a “landing-stage,” they called it on those boats — hanging over the water, and a fellow on it with a rope coiled around in his hands. The gaugecocks pour steam. Wheels turning backward in foam. — *The Belle* stopped!

Every time, we'd watch it as if we'd never seen it before and'd never see it again. Freight coming on and going off — passengers with their carpet-bags getting ashore and aboard — all bumping into one another, and the tattooed mate — you can bet I kept out of his way! — raising Cain over all the decks and the landing-stage at one and the same time. You'd think things'd never straighten out; but in a short ten minutes they would, and we'd be puffing on up-stream.

After supper, the gold-talk calmed down, the people getting mostly into poker games or seven-up: they were a hard lot, the fellows from California, miners anxious to spend fast, and all the rest double-anxious to win from them. I saw oily Acker and the goitre-man, both mighty busy; but Henderson and the Indian

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weren't around. I'd had my fill of looking on at card-games, so I stayed in the open and thought about how I could ever get to California.

It grew dark slow, only it seemed lonesome, because the river, just here, was so empty: there weren't many towns thereabouts, and the points looked angry, and the shores dead. Once I made out some black smoke ahead and reckoned we were going to pass another boat, but we didn't; and once, at a cut-off, I made sure we were going to have the fun of running aground, but we managed to pull through that, too.

The capes got dimmer, and the islands began to look like shadows under their cottonwoods; then the murk closed in, solemn, with a couple of hundred twinkling stars.

I was dog-tired from being up so late the night before, and put my head in my arms on the rail. I remember thinking how wonderful it was with the water lapping by quiet and that pilot taking us blindfold among snags and reefs and sunken wrecks, and setting his boat into marks that an owl couldn't see — remember wondering whether it after all mightn't be better for

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me to be a pilot than a pioneer or a gold-pro prospector — and I must have fallen sound asleep.

“ . . . It's the *Rose o' Baton Rouge!*”

That woke me — somebody singing out that. And somebody answered:

“ Then it's a race. The old *Rose's* bin layin' for a race with *The Belle* come a coon's age!”

On a boat, news travels fast: those two passengers, whoever they were, hadn't much more than said what they did when all the rest of our hundred and fifty passengers came stamping out on the decks. I didn't look at them, though: I looked down stream — from where a pair of lights showed, moving up on us (we were going slow just then, for one reason or another) mighty fast. A big shadow bulked behind these, and out of that shadow sounded, all of a sudden, a whistle, — a hoot, plain as day mocking us and daring us to a race. It was like a giant in the night laughing, and it fair shook the stars.

Races happened almost every day on the Mississippi — desperate races, with lots of money won and lost, and, now and again, with accidents at the ends of them — but

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it so chanced I'd never seen a race to be in one, only some little piece of one from the shore. So you can guess how excited I got, and how I hoped we'd take up that challenge of *The Rose of Baton Rouge*. I'd been fair ashamed of us if we hadn't.

But we did take it: our whistle hooted back a joyful acceptance. We even stopped the engines till the challenger came near abreast of us, and everybody cheered like to yell his head off.

There were bells and bellowed commands. Hands ran up and down, roaring all sorts of things that a body couldn't understand. Everybody got in everybody else's way.

First off, then, *The Belle* and *The Rose* jockeyed for place. The heaviest current on the Mississippi is generally in midstream, so, going north, the way we were, the thing to do was to hug the bank. But we lost out there. *The Rose* nosed inside, and we had to jump to the middle.

"It don't make no shucks," a man that was close to me yelled. "We kin give her cards an' spades — an' beat her all the way to St. Looey anyhow!"

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The Rose was there, right abreast of us: an oldish boat, not by a long shot as good to look at as us, though with good lines, and the smoke and sparks coming out of her chimneys like they were a pair of volcanoes in action. People crowded her decks, too, and called us names.

Aboard *The Belle* more bells clanged. Officers shouted more orders. For an instant, our furnace-doors stood wide open, and a red glow came up and went out. Then came the signal "Full steam ahead!" — We were off.

Along our rails there was such a crowd you could hardly move, and right away every one of them had taken sides with the boat they were riding on. You'd have thought they owned her, or that the pilot was their brother. Every single soul acted — no matter what his job was, or if he was a passenger — like the winning or losing of that race depended on him. You could have thrown a biscuit aboard *The Rose*, and the folks on her kept shaking their fists at the folks aboard us, and the folks aboard us kept shaking their fists at them. The water churned — the boilers panted — the timbers and

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all the woodwork creaked something dreadful. It must have been as bad in *The Rose*; but on *The Belle*, it sounded like a death-bed.

We were racing, they all said, to the next town, about ten miles ahead. The men around me began making bets — not about which boat'd win, because we were all sure ours would, but about how big a lead we'd have when we got to the finish, and how short a time we'd do it in. They called over all sorts of things all the time across to *The Rose* and her officers, and her passengers, too — and *The Rose's* passengers weren't a mite slow to answer. And they shouted — the people on both boats shouted with all their lungs — to their own officers for higher speed — and higher — and higher. As if any Mississippi steamer's officers needed urging in a race!

I must have been as bad as anybody. Anyhow, I worked my way in and out and went from stem to stern, and from boiler-deck to texas, watching everything. I saw the black-crew at work down below — I saw the pilot standing on his wheel up above.

Neck-and-neck! For about six miles we kept neck-and-neck.

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“ But now we're losing ground! ” a man kind of groaned on the hurricane deck.

It was as bad as if he'd insulted the American flag. They near lynched him.

“ We're gaining — we're gaining! ”

It was this that saved him. We were creeping a few yards ahead. All the hundred-and-fifty and more began going it at once, and then the chug-chug of the machinery, and the throbbings and screeches and squeaks and groans getting worse than ever — and everybody talking at once — anybody's words but a giant's would have been drowned out completely.

I enjoyed it, and it worked me sort of crazy. All the same, though, I had a queer feeling inside myself, now and again. That came when I looked away from *The Rose* on our own racer. When the furnace-doors of either boat'd open up for more fuel, like some dragon's jaws that couldn't ever be satisfied, the fires'd light everything up, and you could see the yellow water, white around the steamers, and a spooky island or two, may be, and both shores, as still and deserted — woods and canebrakes — as the day God made them; you could see

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the insane faces of the people on the boats. And, next thing, the doors'd close to, and there were just the boats' lights beyond, with the dark all around, and up above nothing except the stars, millions of miles away, and millions of years old, and kind of saying:

“What's all this silly fuss about, anyhow?”

A fellow in the crowd asked his neighbor so's I pricked my ears:

“How do our boilers stand it?”

“Oh,” says the neighbor, “the engineer knows his business.”

Well, they were raising an awful racket — those boilers. We were straining every nerve we had — anybody could see that — and carrying every ounce of steam we dared: perhaps a couple of ounces more. The clatter was scary; but still *The Rose* kept hugging our labbard bow — and she was taxing herself every bit as hard as we were taxing ourselves.

A hand touched my shoulder. I jumped.

It was the Indian peon. His face I couldn't make out, for the furnace-doors were closed just then, but it wouldn't have shown anything, I know well enough.

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What I could see was that he was beckoning with his free hand.

“What do you want?” I asked.

In the noise that was going on — the engines and timbers and the general yelling of the passengers — I had to use all my lungs.

“Boy come 'long with Red Thunder.” — He didn't raise his voice, and yet it somehow carried.

“Where?” I shouted.

“Henderson-man's cabin.”

That miner's cabin! What for? I didn't want to miss this race.

“I hope to gracious if I do,” I said. “I can't: I'm busy. Don't you see we're all busy here?”

But Red Thunder slipped that one hand from my shoulder to my forearm. The way he gripped me, I thought he'd break both bones!

“Boy gotta come,” he said. “Henderson-man he tell me tell boy he been stabbed. Henderson-man he need boy's help. He mebbie die.”



CHAPTER V

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

WE were there in a minute.

The lamp was lighted in Henderson's stateroom, swaying a little, and for all the port stood open to let in air, and did let in a lot of noise, the place seemed somehow miles away from everything I'd just left, with a kind of scary stillness slinking in its corners. And Hanby! He was cooped in the lower bunk. His eyes were bright, but wild, and it looked to me like every drop of blood had seeped out of him: you remember how red his face was before; well, now, it was as white as the sheet pulled up to his chin.

I must have stared like a bird that a cat's mesmerized. I bleated:

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“ Did they do this last night? ”

“ Yes,” he says. “ Got me in the upper part o’ my chist.”

I thought of the mate and me, him mad and me believing I’d made a fool of myself. “ Have you had a doctor? ” I says.

He shook his head.

I half came back to life. “ Shouldn’t I find a doctor then? There’s like a doctor somewhere on board. Or ought I fetch the Captain — get him to lock up those gamblers — ”

No: that wasn’t the Gold Country’s way. Henderson spoke out strong:

“ I jedge not! When a galoot lets daylight into yuh, why, ef he done it right enough ter kill yuh, yo’ die decent; an’ ef he didn’t, yo’ git well an’ then yo’ git him.”

He had me there!

“ But how about a doctor? ” I asked again.

“ Nor I don’ want no doctor to finish up the job that thar knife begun, nuther,” says Henderson. “ Back in ’24, one on ’em kep’ my pap abed three weeks with pneumoney: I ain’t seed hide or ha’r o’ none o’ yore doc-

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tor-men sence. I got it cyphered out, what I want to do, young brown-eyes. I want some writin' materials — an' yo' mote see ef thar's a lawyer-coyote anywhar yhere-about. Red Thunder, bein' a peon, kyan't git no attention from these folks."

I started off.

"Wait a minute, long-legs," says Hanby. "What's yo' name?"

"Daniel Ireland Frost."

"Well, Danny, fotch that lawyer, so be yo' kin find him, an' writin' materials."

It was only a repetition of what he'd said before. I couldn't make out why he'd stopped me. I went out on deck.

We were gaining on *The Rose*. She was a half-length behind us, and, two-three miles ahead, on the west shore, winked the few lights of some little town. I made out it was the town where the race was going to end.

The crowd was awful excited. You could hardly get anybody to listen to you. Still, I worked around among them, asking everywhere for a lawyer, and finally I did

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come on an old codger who said he was Lawyer Quayle from Parkville. He found paper and ink and fastened his steel spectacles halfway down his nose, and I took him to Henderson's cabin. I was mighty curious about what Hanby was up to, but I was a sight more anxious to see the finish of the race, so I didn't mind a little bit when the miner said he didn't want me to stay in there with him, but to go on about my business.

Both boats were putting out every effort, both running every risk, but the way *The Mississippi Belle* was straining herself was a caution. Her wheels thrashed the water; her engines pounded like a body's heart who's got a sure-kill fit of palpitation: she shivered and quivered all over with it. Still, nobody cared about that. Men were jumping up and down and throwing their hats in the air, for *The Rose of Baton Rouge* was falling farther and farther behind.

"We're doin' it!" the people would yell. "By the Lord Harry, we're doin' it!"

"We sure air!" they'd say, and then they'd laugh and laugh and clap each other on the backs. Some of 'em had got to capering and dancing. We all felt — me, too

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— as if it was as much to our credit as it was to the boat's or her crew's. And now the lights of that town were close to our bow.

“Henderson-man say boy come back again.”

There was Red Thunder at my elbow! I jumped out of reach of that grip of his.

“No sir-ree! Just you give me a minute this time!” I said.

I got it, too. I kept dodging. I pranced away from that Injun till *The Belle* had come plumb abreast of those lights, and everybody had gone crazier than ever. For we'd won!

“Now,” says the Indian, very quiet.

I'd stopped in the excitement, and he got me. He led me straight back to Henderson's cabin.

Lawyer Quayle and a couple of other passengers were coming out of it, pretty grave and melancholy and important. We stood kind of wide and let them pass, but then we went in.

“Come yhere,” says Hanby. “Set.”

I got a chair facing him, where he was huddled the way I'd left him. He certainly was white!

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“Them was the witnesses with that thar lawyer,” he said. Pale as he was, his voice sounded right powerful. “It ain’t all gold in Californy, lad, an’ I been plenty poor enough out thar, times; but now I got somethin’ to leave. So — in case this yhere scratch turns out tol’ble serious as it jes’ mote — I been preparin’ by makin’ mah will.”

I didn’t like to think he was in real danger of dying, and I said so. I’d never seen anybody die — wasn’t in the room when my father died, or Uncle Charley — I choked on the words. I don’t believe Henderson even heard them.

“An’ I’ve remembered you,” he anyhow went right on — “fo’ what yo’ done las’ night, un’erstan” young brown-eyes — as it’s very fittin’ an’ proper I should.”

I tried to thank him, but to say there wasn’t a reason why he should put me in his will. Indeed, I didn’t more than half believe him. No use saying anything. He wouldn’t listen — wanted to do all the talking himself. He talked so much that it didn’t seem to me, then, he could be so very sick!

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“ Never yo’ mind the details,” he said: “ p’int is, what I says is so. Got somethin’ wuth a will, I have. Got a good mind to tell yuh what.”

Perhaps he was light-headed. I don’t know. Anyhow, he did tell me, with the stolid-faced Injun looking on. Right there, lying in his cabin, he told me, and so it was aboard *The Mississippi Belle* I first heard tell of the Pomo Claim.

Henderson said that he and another man — Hanby never called him anything but his “ pard ” — hadn’t met with any luck for a long time, prospecting, but at last they struck a wonderful deposit — he didn’t say where. They staked a claim, and then found out that their land, under some deed or other drawn up years ago by Mission Fathers, was the registered property of a little band of Pomo Indians. The Pomos are Kulanapans and belong in the northwest of California, only somehow this lot had wandered away from their right place years before; they’d stuck to the fathers when the anti-mission rows came on, and for that, even if they still were peons in name, they’d been rewarded by this land-grant.

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“’Tain’t no good to them, neither,” said Hanby. “They don’ know nuthin’ ’boot the gold — jes’ live peaceable on one corner o’ the estate, that’s all — but, not bein’ what-yo’-call nomad kind o’ redskins, they hold by their home, an’ they axed a heap sight higher price fo’ it than me an’ mah pard could scrape together.”

So, Henderson said, the partner had put up all the money he had for an option, while Hanby was chosen to take such as he could get for his expenses back east. The partner was too “ailing” to attempt the trip. Henderson was to make his way as far as the Mississippi and raise the balance due — raise it from the partner’s brother:

“Well,” the sick man continued, “pard’, he up an’ died jes’ when I was set to start. The terms o’ that agreement with the Pomos entail complete nullification o’ the sale, an’ forfeiture o’ the sum already in hand paid — them thar nut-crackers is the proper legal words fo’ it — meanin’ loss o’ the hull investment — ef I or mah pard’s heirs don’ pay over the rest. So I come right on anyhow to rout-out that brother. Mah pard’, he

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hadn't heard on him fo' a grasshopper's winter; but the chance has got to be took."

It had all quieted down on deck, though the engines were still panting considerable. Through that open port I could just hear the who-whooping of a whippoorwill somewhere along the shore. Then Red Thunder, squatting over by a bulkhead, began to sing, very low, a sort of chant — sounded as if it might be an Indian lament for the dying — and you sort of had to listen whether you wanted or not. Hanby looked like he needed it, too: he was all done up from so much gassing. I felt a chill go tickling down my spine.

"So's yo' see, brown-eyes," says Henderson, "I'm 'most a terrible rich man."

I didn't see it. Seemed to me he had a long way between him and that claim. But I only nodded: I wanted to get out.

"Yes, sir," Hanby kept it up, though, "I'm a man with his fingers on millions an' millions. I got the plan, fig'rs an' all that in this li'l' oil-skin pouch that's a-hangin' 'roun' mah neck." His fingers fumbled at his throat. "Jes' a couple o' inches from where that thar

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

knife poked las' night. Millions, boy! Ef I kin only pull through this yhere leak in mah chist an' git to Heliopolis — ”

My town! Why was he going to my town? I forgot the creepy feeling everything had given me and opened my mouth to ask him that question.

I never got so far. Red Thunder had stopped chanting, but the whippoorwill let out another doleful call. All along, I hadn't been able to take my eyes off Henderson, and the Indian had his back half-turned from the window, only somehow at that starting again of the bird on shore, I looked up at the port.

There — listening — with its mouth open, and its bloodshot eyes popping out — there was the bloated face of the goitre-man!

He saw I saw him. He jerked away. I made a jump; but he was gone.

“What's wrong?” asked Hanby in the bunk beside me. “What's wrong, Brownie?”

I was looking out of the window — and at that very clock-tick, something else happened there: something so's I realized a lot more'd gone wrong than just us

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being listened to by a sharper, who might like to ruin Henderson's option and get one for himself. A sort of thud shook the whole boat. From below came a running of feet. From somewhere — not the smokestacks — swept a big gust of smoke and sparks.

And then — you couldn't tell where — all around you — dozens and dozens of people were hollering:

“FIRE!”



CHAPTER VI

FLAMING DEATH

WITHOUT hardly thinking what I was up to, I wriggled through that window — dropped — lit on the deck.

For all the grand looks of the best of them, most of those river-steamers at that time weren't much more than so much tinder and kindling. Anything'd set them ablaze, and lots of things did: folks used to say there were nigh as many people burned up on the Mississippi as there were drowned there. Of course, this was maybe putting it a sight too strong; but the general statement had a heap about it, all the same — and now I was in for a boat-fire.

Exactly what it was started the trouble on *The Belle*

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I never did hear: flames went too fast on such craft, once they'd got headway, for anybody to discuss 'em, and when they were over, why, mostly, those who could have told were past telling you — unless they came back as ghosts to do it. A piece of metal superheated — a match thrown around carelessly by a gambler who had his mind too much on the cards — an ounce beyond specifications of steam: I don't know. There must have been some sort of explosion, but it wasn't our boilers — then. Anyhow, we'd risked too much on our race — taken one chance and one strain too many — and here we had to pay the price of our victory.

The Belle was burning below, like a dry bundle of straw, and she was in the middle of the river. It looked as if she couldn't hope to beach before her decks fell, or the water came in to sink her, and she was jammed with passengers, and every blessed passenger was in a panic.

Bells — yells. Orders — screechings — shrieks of steam — howls and calls of human beings that weren't more than half-human. A whole mass of men, surging fore and aft again — people fighting to get somewhere

FLAMING DEATH

and not knowing where — to do something to save their lives, and not knowing what — other people tripping and falling and being tramped on. Hands guarding the lifeboats with revolvers and fending off the men that struggled to get into them:

“Not time yet! — Wait for orders. — Mayn't be needed!” Their voices, though, were just as scared as anybody else's.

All of it in a dark night that our own lamps didn't do a lot to light! Between the other noises, the roar of the flames that were swallowing away the boat from under us, and every little while clouds of smoke that strangled you.

Somehow, I got to the texas. That was as far off from the fire as I could get, and I must have felt there'd be a sort of comfort in seeing what the pilot was doing — in the whole history of the Mississippi, there never was a pilot who left his post in a fire till the last passenger was ashore or burnt to a cinder or drowned with him. Our man was at his wheel; but the current set heavy down the midstream channel-centre, with a strong draw, and, in all that racket and excitement of fear, he

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was having his troubles making his orders understood, or getting them obeyed. Still, I did see him swing around, though the face of the stream made us drift dreadfully, lost us time when every minute and every yard shoreward counted.

“Eight and a half!” — The leadsman was sane, anyhow, and taking his soundings as calm as you please, only he likely broke his lungs getting the words to the pilot. “E-e-eight feet! Seven-and —”

“Stand by!”

We were out of the channel, but had somehow struck shoal-water! If we went aground here, none of us would probably live to tell about it. I looked for the shoreline — couldn't make it out — couldn't see any lights of a town that might send out extra boats, either. I looked for some sign of *The Rose of Baton Rouge* — just darkness.

Our steamer scraped on mud. The pilot pulled at his bell-wires — howled down the engine-room tubes for all the steam there was.

Other passengers were beside me there, staring into the wheelhouse:

FLAMING DEATH

“ Put her down — down hard! ”

“ Snatch her! ”

The pilot — it was the red-bearded one, but his partner had come up and was standing beside him — bel-
lowed: “ Shet yo’ jaws! ”

More smoke swept over us — but this time was blown down the stacks. *The Belle* rasped — alone there in the night. Then it seemed just as if she tried to balance herself on a ledge — but then she went over — and we went on.

On — but where? By leaning far out, I could see the water. We were drifting two feet down to every foot we made shorewards. Besides, now, you could hear the thunder of the fire and the crackling of the wood over everything else. How were we ever going to be able to make the shore?

It wasn’t till then that, with a sort of horror, I remembered Henderson. I knew that when the time came for a rush — if it must come — he, wounded like he was, wouldn’t stand any show in this frantic mob. Already, some of them had their knives out, and pistols. I didn’t feel a bit of a wish to go and help him, but I

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thought what Athos would do, or Leather Stocking, and I managed it — got back to his cabin.

He was out of bed and in his shirt and trousers and stocking-feet. It must have hurt him like the dickens to do it, but he had an arm around Red Thunder's shoulders, and he was trying to drag himself toward the door. But he couldn't do it. He needed one more person there to lean on.

"Here," I said; "put your other arm around me."

He shook his white head. "A very perty offer, Danny — yo' air right kind — to make it. Only I kain't accept. This yhere's mah peon — paid fo' him. Diff'rent. Yo' gotta go an' save yore own skin."

There was my chance. I'd submitted my proposition, as you might say, and he'd refused it. Still, now I'd come this far, I couldn't turn back, even when he gave me every excuse. Besides, what did I know about that Indian? He wasn't any better than a slave, the way Aaron Acker had said — didn't Hanby just now explain he'd paid for him? — and, though I'd noticed he always did quick enough what his master told him to in quiet times, it didn't seem natural that the red man

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would love the white any too well. How'd I know but Red Thunder'd desert Hanby when the rush came? So I just got a hold of that other arm — and then I knew Henderson was too weak to resist.

“I shore am a picter, I am,” he muttered. “Dependin’ on a Injun an’ a boy!”

I asked: “Have you got any valuables we can maybe take along?”

“I al’ays travel light.” He managed to put a smile on his bloodless lips. “Ain’t got nothin’ ’cept my papers, an’ them’s where I said. A gun an’ a knife an’ a blanket I come east with. Them you gotta have: but travel light, Danny. Anywheres in life, the less you carry, the quicker you arrive.”

Well, we got him on deck — and what was going on there then was worse than before. Those few minutes had made a big difference. Some of the small boats had been put off, under the crew’s directions, but they weren’t enough to relieve matters, and the passengers who were left — well, an insane-asylum afire couldn’t have been worse. It was all curses and shouts and frightened, fighting men. The planks were blistering.

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The smoke suffocated you, and up one of the hatchways climbed a dull red glow: while we looked at it, that turned to a volcano of flame.

“She’s gone!”

The cry went up and sent everybody rushing around those flames to the stern, where a fellow had called out that a lifeboat was, which the steamer’s crew had overlooked or forgotten and left unguarded. We — Henderson, Red Thunder and me — were carried along at the edges, the way the smoke-squalls were carrying the sparks.

It was a terrible sight. I made out skinny Acker and the man with the goitre knifing their way through. People dropped on both sides of them. They got the boat, too, before anybody could pick himself up and protest, and they swung her free on her davits; but that took the work of both of them — they couldn’t fight off the maddened crowd while they were doing it, and when they jumped in, twice the number that the little craft ought to hold were there ahead of them. Knives flashed again, and somebody that was in too much of a hurry must have sliced one of the ropes. The boat tipped stern

FLAMING DEATH

up and shot down into the water, spilling out Aaron and the other gambler and every other soul that had fought to board her.

I saw a few black figures come to the surface and strike out swimming, but there was no time to see any more. Our labbard side was already a roaring furnace, and officers, revolvers in their hands, were shouting for everybody to come to stabbard, where some more boats were. The crowd rushed.

“Steady!” — Those officers bawled themselves hoarse. — “If anyone shoves, we’ll shoot.”

Might as well have said that to a streak of lightning in last night’s storm! The crowd piled right over them. They did shoot, but it didn’t stop anybody except the people that were hit. It was going to be over there just like it had been back here — and Red Thunder and I had a wounded man to take care of.

“Boy swim?” the Indian asked me. He hadn’t any more expression on his face than he’d had when Acker threatened to bore a hole in him.

I nodded. I’m a mighty good swimmer, if I do say it myself.

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“Then this way,” says Red Thunder.

He pointed. He meant we should have to run through those flames, pulling Henderson with us, and then, still pulling him, make a dive for it — and try to swim, with Hanby, to the shore. The crowd blocked us to labbard, and in the water astern we’d sure be dragged to the bottom by such poor fellows as were poor swimmers and had been dumped out of Aaron’s boat.

It looked to me as if we three were as good as dead whatever we tried, so I didn’t need much courage to try this way. Henderson was about unconscious now, from being thrown around the way he’d been, and he couldn’t make any more resistance to us than a baby — but he was a baby-giant and a thoroughly dead weight. We ripped off his shirt and wrapped it right around his head — wrapped our own coats around our heads — got him under the armpits — started.

On that side, the flames had jumped to the texas above us and were running along to the wheelhouse. Funny things go through your head when you’re in such tight places. I thought about my mother, of course, but then, too, I thought about that red-bearded pilot and ’most

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envied him. All I was going to do was try and save one man's life and my own — I expected to lose both, not to mention the peon's — but the pilot was working for everybody. I knew that he must be up there, feet on the spokes of his wheel with the glass cracking around him and his clothes ascorch, keeping *The Belle's* head straight for shore, where he'd likely hold her till he died.

Down went our heads then, Red Thunder's and mine. We jumped right into the fire, Henderson between us. We were in the very middle of it.

The fire fell on us and wrapped us in — we were on fire ourselves — we were part of the fire! But there wasn't too much of it there yet: we dragged and pulled — and came through.

Our clothes were flames. We climbed the rail, still hanging on to Hanby — and, somehow — we dove with him. We probably looked like torches thrown out into the night.

A whistling through the air. I struck water — you can't think how good it was! I went down — down — down.

Then I began to come up, and I realized I'd let go my

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hold of the miner. I bobbed out at the surface and shook the water out of my eyes. Where was he? The fire lit up everything now. I saw him, about ten yards away — Red Thunder had him. My arms weren't scorched so badly but that I could swim — in fact, at the moment, I thought they were a lot more scorched than they really were. I struck out to him — managed to touch him.

Taking turns, the Indian and I swam shorewards under Henderson, treading water, our hands under his shoulders, to keep his head up. We hadn't gone a safe distance from *The Belle* when I looked back at her. She was all one curtain of flame. Her smokestacks toppled. There was an awful explosion — she was blown into bits.



CHAPTER VII

AMBUSHED

WOOD and metal — people, too — struck all around, but didn't hit us, and if I lost my sense of direction, Red Thunder never once lost his: we circled the clutter of floating wreckage — there were awful sounds coming from it that we didn't dare listen to — and steered a bee-line for the closer shore. It wasn't near so far as I'd been afraid it was. Besides, along toward the end of our pull, we saw a burning plank had been blown over there; its flames were shrunk a lot by that time, but it did serve us as a sort of lighthouse.

We landed alongside and yanked Henderson up. Of course, we hadn't been able, in the night and everything,

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to handle him perfectly; he'd fainted because of his wound, and he was pretty near drowned.

The place where we found ourselves was a mudbank in front of a reed-thicket; it looked like the overgrown potters' field at the back of a cemetery, and Hanby looked like he was ready to be buried. But Red Thunder knew more than me.

"Him not dead," says the Indian. "Not dead for long time. Boy look."

Now, I've heard tell that what they call the Marshall Hall method of resuscitation wasn't introduced till 1856, and I don't mean to say Dr. Hall didn't work it out for himself, same as lots better ways have been worked out since; but when I saw a man demonstrate the Hall system years later, I couldn't help recognizing it for about what Red Thunder did that night in '49 along the Mississippi. I reckon that the redskins — or the Pomos, anyhow — had figured out the same system by means of long experience.

First off, after restaunching the wound, the Indian put the miner on his left side and ordered that I watch to see his arms weren't laid on or twisted during the job.

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Next, he made a pillow out of his own wet clothes and turned Henderson over on it, face down, so's the pillow rested under his chest; and after that he put a hand between the shoulder-blades and a little on them and pressed it. Then he'd pull his patient slowly up toward where he was kneeling himself — left side — push him quietly back till he was near down, and put on that shoulder-pressure again. It was a ticklish job to do so's not to make the knife-hurt worse; still, that Indian managed it: three movements.

He made them over and over, at the rate of, say, fifteen to the minute, and in about five minutes Hanby began to breathe naturally, and open his eyes. It's not the best method, according to the doctors these days, only it worked then, and that was the main thing: our miner was safe from one danger, even if he was plumb out of his head because of his knife-wound.

“Travel light,” he babbled. “The less you carry, the quicker you'll arrive.” And he laughed.

Well, you'd have believed we'd had about enough for one night; but there was more. Henderson's laugh rang out dreadful hollow beside the burning log and across the

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black water, where people were still straggling, and at that, from behind us in the reeds, came — a shot!

There was a flash and a crack, and a bullet whistled between us. The Indian jumped up, lithe and quick, and ran right toward it.

I followed: there wasn't anything more to do for Henderson, just then. Red Thunder was already ahead of me, but I could just see where the reeds were shaking from his passage, so I plumped in there — and in there it was jet dark.

Dark and short. I made out the forms of two men, tussling. By the time I got to within a couple of yards of them, one had clubbed the other. That other fell, but grabbed away whatever it was he'd been clubbed with, and, his weapon being gone, the clubber ran. I helped up the fellow that was on the ground: Red Thunder. He was kind of stunned, and I had to lead him for the first steps, but when I got him back to the place where we'd left Henderson — which the light from that still burning log made clear enough — I saw he had in his hand one of those dueling-pistols that folks sometimes kept in water-tight cases.

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“Whose is it?” I asked. “Who was it shot at us?”

He shook his head. “Too quick. Red Thunder couldn’t see.”

But he looked hard at me in the nearly-darkness, and I looked hard at him. We were both thinking the same thing. We were both thinking that Aaron Acker or the man who’d eavesdropped at Henderson’s cabin-window — the man with the goitre — had somehow escaped from the capsized lifeboat. And they didn’t mean some one of us to escape from them.

A lot of people had come out of all that night’s troubles alive, and by and by we began to get in touch with them, as the dawn began. We didn’t set our eyes on the men we suspected, but others had swum ashore the way we did, and more got there later, and about all of them were attracted, soon, to that burning wreckage.

The Rose of Baton Rouge — she’d had something go wrong, too, in her machinery as a penalty for the race, I reckon, and’d been held back — she came along and cruised around for survivors and took us aboard, Henderson, unconscious again by now, and a doctor on the new boat shaking his head over him.

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"This is a mighty sick man," says the doctor — and Hanby just lay still and never opened his eyes all the way to Heliopolis.

Lordy, but I was glad to get home! The white pale-fence, with the brick walk through the grass — the white, two-story frame house, with its big portico and high pillars: after what had happened to me, these things were a sight for sore eyes; but the best was my mother, grave-faced and yet brave, standing, very straight, at the front door that I'd used to be so proud of because, instead of a common iron latch, it had a brass knob and a big knocker like the grand places in New Orleans.

I can see mother even now in her tight bodice and full skirt; she had her white-lace mitts on, short-fingered, and around her ankles black ribbons crisscrossed down to her shiny black shoes. Her face was like an angel's — only, a strong-minded angel's — it always was.

Red Thunder and some men from the water-front were carrying Henderson up on a stretcher, just behind me. Nobody knowing anything about him, and there being nowhere else to go with him, I'd risked bringing him home with me. Mother was considerable taken

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aback at first, but even before I'd half explained matters, she had had him whisked upstairs to the spare-room and tucked him in bed herself, with Miss Lucy Landis — who was a sort of neighbor, only she took pay for coming in, doing a few chores like tidying and brisking up the house, and gossiping and snooping — she, I say, helping a little and palavering a lot.

“Lands' sake!” she said — she had a mouth a good deal like a rat-trap. “There's sich a sin as bein' too soft-hearted, Mis' Frost! Danny, your paw wouldn't never go this far, if he was alive — loading up with a regular no-account, an' him dyin', too. Henderson? Hanby Henderson? There used to be a Widow Henderson lived in one of them tumbledown shanties 't other end of Madison Lane, near Wilson's mill, when I was a tot; but she passed away forty-five year' ago, an' there ain't been nobody of that name in Heliopolis since.”

“Mr. Frost would have done just what I'm doing, Miss Lucy,” said mother. “I knew him a little better than you did. Now I want to talk to Dan, and I'm sure this Indian can look after Mr. Henderson while you run over for Dr. Travers.”

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“Land!” said Miss Lucy — but she went.

So mother and I had a confab in our big parlor, on the sofa that carried a lace antimacassar across its top and faced the fireplace — painted with Spanish brown it is now, though I remember I used to have to scrub it with a soft brick. I told all about the fight and what Hanby had told me, and about the explosion and that shot from the reeds.

“Dan,” said mother, her big eyes gleaming at me, “you’re your father’s son, and I am proud of you. This poor miner will stay here as long as I do; but I must warn you of one thing: I don’t think I shall be here after three days from now.”

The rag-carpet was the old one, worn shiny, but kept clean as a pin; the horsehair easy-chairs — never easy — and the couple of splint-bottom ones were exactly where they were on the morning I was born. The steel-engraving of the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the framed mottoes mother’d woven when she was a girl at Columbia, Pa.; the mahogany centre-table, the lamp on it and the books that had as regular places as if a civil-engineer’d surveyed for them — Ossian and

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“Memory’s Garden” and Bryant’s “Poems” and Longfellow’s “Voices of the Night” — nothing looked as if it had been touched, except to be dusted, since I was here for my last vacation. Everything looked as permanent as a mountain.

“Three days?” I echoed her.

“Judge Minchen,” she said.

I might have known it: there wasn’t any mercy in that sour-apple face of his. Not that I wanted his mercy except for mother. But there he was going to foreclose in seventy-two hours on our home and the patch of ground around — everything that was left of my father’s estate — unless mother could satisfy his mortgage. And of course she couldn’t.

“But I can work,” she said — and her face fair beamed with pride and determination when she said it. “Ours is pioneer stock, Dan, and no Rowntree or Frost was ever ashamed to work. If we have to, you and I’ll get credit to run a little farm, and we’ll farm it with our own four hands.”

I never saw her look more handsome. I gave her a big hug and kissed her on both cheeks — she was an upstand-

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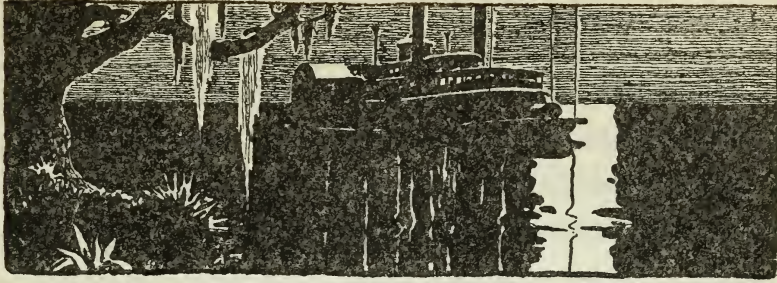
ing, healthy woman, and her cheeks were pink — and told her, no matter how strong she thought she was, I'd do the outside work, whatever it might be.

“ Judge Minchen's a skunk! ” I said.

“ No, ” she said; “ he's lost a power of money himself, and, anyhow, he's entirely within his legal rights. That's what he wrote in his letter. He's coming tonight for my answer. ”

Miss Lucy interrupted us then, bringing Doc' Travers. He overhauled Henderson and didn't give any hope at all:

“ May live through the night. May not. ” — Doc' had a quick, sharp way of speaking, like a terrier's bark, it was. — “ Doubt if he recovers consciousness. Watch out for a hemorrhage: fatal. Keep him quiet. If a hemorrhage, fetch me. ”



CHAPTER VIII

BESIDE A FLICKERING CANDLE

NOBODY in town knew anything about any Henderson, except the widow Miss Lucy'd mentioned, and it seemed certain — not only then, but from what happened afterwards — that it wasn't on account of having kin here, supposing he ever had had any, that he'd come to Heliopolis. After Doc' and Miss Lucy'd gone, mother and I tried to pump Red Thunder, but the Indian didn't appear to know a mite more than us either about the miner's life before he went west, or even his partner's name in California.

“There's that oil-skin pouch around his neck, that he talked to you about,” said mother. If he has any relatives, they ought to be notified, and it might tell us.”

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Henderson was lying very still on the bed, his white beard combed out and sticking up stiff like a scrub-brush. I pulled back the covers: both his big hands were on his chest, and every separate finger had its own grip on that pouch. I tried to loosen them: first he swore and then he made to jump away. With his eyes tight closed and all, it was terrible.

“We’ll have to give it up,” mother decided, “till — till afterward. Dr. Travers said to keep him quiet.”

Quiet again we got him and quiet kept him for the rest of that long day, giving him now and again some sort of soothing medicine Doc’ had left, though often enough that was nigh impossible: the dying man tossed his head so. The shadows got longer — the sun went down — the stars came out, one after another, so you could count the new ones through the window by the bed.

Mother brought a tallow candle and lit it with one of the sulphur matches we used at that time. She stood it, in her best brass candle-stick, on a table, and I shoved the table near where poor old Hanby lay, while mother stuck up a book in front of the candle to shade him. Red Thunder all the time sat on the floor in a corner,

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just watching — wouldn't hear of a chair; I judged he was getting ready to begin his death-chant once more. And then the knocker shattered away at the front door.

“ I'll go,” I said.

“ No,” said mother, “ I will: it'll be for me — James Minchen.”

She went down the stairs and let him in. It was the Judge, right enough — you couldn't go wrong on that voice of his, like a saw striking a knot in a hickory log. I noticed that, for all mother still kind of stood up for him to me, she didn't ask him into our parlor. They had their talk in the hall.

For a good while, I didn't pay any attention. There was the medicine to be given to the sick man — time for it — and then, what with Red Thunder sitting as if he was a carved statue, and Hanby rolling his head, not violent, but steady, this way and that — this way and that — the house was so gloomy, I went to the window and looked out at those stars and at our yard that I'd played pirate in when I was a little kid and that wasn't going to be ours much longer.

Still, my attention soon veered 'round to what was

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going on below-stairs—you might say Judge Jim jerked it there. The spare-room door was open, and it was right at the head of the steps. You couldn't hear mother's words, only just the low flow of her calm voice, but there wasn't a syllable came out of Minchen that didn't vault clear up to me. It sounded like the man was trying to lash himself into a temper so's he could do something he'd otherwise be ashamed of — trying, and succeeding mighty well.

“No, ma'am,” he says: “that's the law, and I stick by it. The law of Missouri is good enough fer me! It is you who wants to evade the law. I've written you my ultimatum, and now I tell it. You owe me money; if it ain't paid me when due — and that's before the bank closes, on Wednesday arternoon at four P.M. — I take immediate possession of this house and every inch of the lot it stands on!”

I was so angry myself, hearing that man try to brow-beat mother just because she was a woman, I made a start to run down stairs; but I heard a kind of gulp from the bed. I looked around — and then I knew I'd got to stay. After all, Judge Minchen wouldn't hurt

BESIDE A FLICKERING CANDLE

mother physically, and whatever he said I could pay him out for — but here was Hanby sitting straight up in bed, with his eyes open for what anybody could tell was the last time on earth. It was plain he didn't understand where he was, but it was just as plain he'd heard all I had and somehow made out something of what it meant.

He saw me and beckoned with a bony finger. He tried to speak. Too much for him: he fell back on the pillow, with the blood spurting out of his mouth and running down his white beard.

This was the hemorrhage Doc' Travers had said might come on. Not knowing much about such things, I thought maybe the medicine would hold death back a while, but I didn't want to scare mother — she was in enough hot water already — and I didn't dare to trust an Indian: Red Thunder might resuscitate a half-drowned man, but he was only a savage and'd like as not throw the medicine out of the window, or swallow it himself. As it was, he'd just started that chant!

I ran to him and shook him. Well as I could, I described where Doc' lived and plain commanded him

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to slide down the back stairs and run there as fast as his legs would tote him.

“Tell him he’s got to come over right away!” I whispered.

Well, he went, silent and quick, and I took up the medicine and turned to the bed. It was in a terrible state, but the bleeding had stopped as quick as it began, and Henderson was fully conscious. The candle flickered in a faint touch of air from the doorway, and that made shadows dance like imps across Hanby’s sunken face and wet beard — shadows where the worst shadow of all was sort of lurking.

He couldn’t wave away the bottle — had only barely enough strength to talk in a funny, far-away voice — but he said:

“None o’ that. — It’s to make me sleep, I guess. I’ll sleep soon enough.”

He was right — I’d been panic-silly. I put the bottle down.

“I’ve sent for the doctor,” I said.

“No good,” says he.

“But can’t I do anything for you, Mr. Henderson?”

BESIDE A FLICKERING CANDLE

“Yes. Come yhere. Near-to.”

I went over and stood beside him. I'd picked up a cloth and damped it at the washstand; and, as gently as my shaky fingers would let me, I tried to clean his face: he wouldn't have it.

“Got ta hurry,” he said.

The candle flickered some more. The shadows were dancing on the wall opposite now. He says — all broken up, the words were:

“I'm a-goin' — fast. This what's 'round my — neck. When I'm gone — open. Yo'll see. Travel — light, brown-eyes: I tol' yuh — the less yo' carry — quicker — git thar.”

His hands picked at the sheet. His fingers were frightfully skinny.

I said: “I don't believe you ought to talk. I don't believe the doctor'd like you to talk, if he was here.”

Hanby said “Shet up” without changing his voice. It was all in what they describe as a low monotone: “Deliver — letter you'll find — in — pouch. The address's — writ on to it. 'Nother thing: mostly, it don' pay to — be afeered o' anyone — in this yhere life — life

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too short anyway — but you — look out fer — fer — Jake Wickwire.”

How much of this was delirium and how much wasn't, I couldn't any more than guess. Just to humor him and take up his time — what else was there to do? — I asked who Jake Wickwire might be. Not that I cared any. I was too busy watching the door and hoping Red Thunder'd hurry back with Doc' Travers, and wondering what would happen if Doc' was out on another case. Still, I'd never heard tell of any Jacob Wickwire, and I said so.

Henderson's gasping got worse and worse. Says he:

“Don' rightly know — mahself. Heerd his name — aboard *Belle*. But he's the galoot who — ” A spasm twisted Hanby. Sweat came out on his wrinkled forehead — big drops. The candle flickered some more. “You deliver — that thar — letter — an' that thar will!” He fumbled till he got my hand, then near broke it, with a strength that scared me. He looked clean into my head. He put every bit of energy he had left in what he was saying — sort of shot me with it. “Prom —

BESIDE A FLICKERING CANDLE

promise! Do yuh — promise, brow —, Danny — Frost?”

I nodded my head — and he died.

I didn't have to have seen death before to know it then. He died while I nodded: all in a gasp.

That must have been about nine o'clock. By half-past, mother and I'd done everything we could. Judge Minchen had left long ago; the doctor'd come and gone, and Red Thunder was upstairs with Mr. Corby, the undertaker. Mother said we just had got to eat; so, not bothering to use the dining-room, she and I sat in the kitchen, over some cold stuff: corn-beef and pone and buttermilk. I waited till that was done, and then I handed to her what I hadn't shown to anybody else and had only just taken a peep into myself: Hanby Henderson's oil-skin pocket-book.

“I think,” I said, “you've got a right to see this.”

“Me?” she asked, mystified, I guess, at my tone.

“Yes,” I told her, feeling all of a sudden the grown-up man. “Because of the top paper. Look at it.”

She did. It was the letter the miner'd talked to me

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about, and, of all things in the world, it was addressed to one of my mother's brothers:

MR. CHAS. W. ROWNTREE

HELIOPOLIS

Mo.

She gave a little catchy-sound. "Why," she said, "I would know this handwriting anywhere! This was written by your Uncle Roger, Dan — my brother who left here years ago — and we've never seen nor heard of him since!"

Something — just hope, as like as not — whispered to me what it might all mean: that Uncle Roger, the Rowntree family black-sheep, was Hanby's "pard," and maybe hadn't been such a regular black-sheep after all — that he'd died out there in California — that this letter was written just before his death — and that, one way or another, mother and I were going to be hitched up to the history of the Pomo Claim.



CHAPTER IX

HANBY HENDERSON'S WILL

“**W**AIT,” said mother, with a warning look. “I hear some people coming up the walk. We don’t want the gossips to see this.”

She put back the letter and tucked the pouch inside her dress. And she wasn’t a minute too soon, either: it looked for a moment as if half the women-folk of Heliopolis were coming in our back door.

Of course, knowing as much as they couldn’t help knowing, the neighbors had been watching our house, peeping around their blinds, and they saw Doc’ go and Mr. Corby arrive. So it was only human nature for them soon to be inside, with Miss Lucy Landis, of course, heading the brigade and gassing more emphatic than

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any. In this part of the country, folks always came around like that, right off, when a body died — to help “lay out the corpse” and to “condole” — and I must say Miss Lucy had the best nose for trouble that ever was. Regular hound-scent.

Pretty soon, she was going on:

“Ain’t it terrible? The po’r lorn cretur! I do wish I’d thought to brew him some of that yherb-tea out’n my grandma’s receipt — might ‘a’ give him strength. I ain’t got a hull lot of confidence in Doc’ Travers’ medicines. — An’ it’s so hard on you, Mis’ Frost. If you’d only listened to me, Mis’ Frost, an’ not took him in! — Danny, you didn’t do your maw much of a good turn this day. — ‘Course, it might ‘a’ been worse: one of them pison long sicknesses. But they’re sayin’ it was a knife as did it.” Her thin, rat-trap jaws clicked on that, and she bounced at me again. “How’d it come about, Danny?”

“Dan has told Dr. Travers what he knows,” said mother. “And the doctor has told the authorities.”

Miss Lucy sniffed.

“Well,” says she, “I shorely hope so, for he won’t

HANBY HENDERSON'S WILL

tell nobody else nothin'. — I wonder, now, will they catch whoever it was. Can't 'a' got fur — must be some'ers along the river. — An' why'd anybody do it? Must 'a' ben some reason. That's what I says, comin' along here. I says to Mis' Robbins — didn't I, Mis' Robbins? — I says: 'Why'd anybody want to do away with an old man — he looked anyways sixty-past — who you could see hadn't more'n about two bits on him?' My very words, weren't they, Mis' Robbins? "

"That's so," Mrs. Robbins nodded — and everybody else nodded, too, agreeing there was a mystery.

Mother said the motive would likely come out in time, but it didn't seem to satisfy them.

"P'r'aps so — an' then p'r'aps not," says Miss Lucy.

"They had ought to advertise a reward, if they want it to. That's what they done, remember, when they couldn't find out who shot Colonel Halloway, an' then they got the nigger mighty quick, an' hung him — alibi an' all." She was running out of breath at last and began to see she'd never pump much out of us. "Still, Mis' Frost, what's done can't be mended: us gyrls is

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here to give what help we can. Wouldn't you like we should set up with the remains?"

They stayed all night. Long after I went to bed, I could hear 'em speculating and scurrying up and down the stairs between the spare-room and the kitchen, cooking coffee and dishing up cold victuals: making themselves right at home, and making me right mad into the bargain. When she got the chance, mother came in to see me.

"Now," she said, and locked the door, and sort of smiled to see my wrathful face, "we'll find out what all this paper's about."

She had a candle and the oil-skin pouch. I drew up a table beside my bed, and she sat down beside me.

I'd been right: Uncle Roger was the partner whose name Henderson hadn't happened to ever mention to me, and the letter was written by him when he was dying. Not knowing his brother had died before him, he said in it he'd made a will that left everything he "died possessed of" to Uncle Charley, and on the margin of the letter was this line:

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“ Will duly probated out thar.
H. Henderson.”

Then, the will of Hanby himself, after legally describing the Pomo Claim's location and such, and stating the testator hadn't any surviving relatives, left his half-interest, too, to his partner's brother, having no other living kin as could rightfully lay claim to it, he said. This meant that mother, being Uncle Charley's residuary legatee, owned the whole shooting-match!

No use telling you how I felt: it seemed as if all the gold in the west had been dumped on to that table. But mother took the news very strange — in that year of '49, 'most everybody was ready to believe anything about California, and yet there she was without a smile and shaking her head.

“ You don't believe it? ” I asked her.

I know now the dwindling of father's estate, and the way Judge Minchen showed his cards about our mortgage, had made her a heap less trusting in her fellow men than, for all her courage and determination, she had used to be. And I know now (and this is the really important part) she saw a good deal farther ahead than me:

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guessed what I might have to do, and dreaded it. But just then I was fair knocked over by the way she showed she doubted everything.

“How do we know there is any gold in this claim?” she said. “I’ve heard that lots of the claims are what they call ‘wild-cat.’ Let’s just read over the rest of this will.”

So we did. And what do you think? To wind up with, Henderson’s testament, which is the law’s word for such things, declared that, “as evidence of gratitude for a timely and beneficial warning rendered in emergency,” he gave and bequeathed to Daniel Ireland Frost, minor, “the Indian slave-boy, or, rightly, peon, known as Red Thunder.”

Mother laughed in a queer way. She said:

“This silly property in California’s trouble enough for me — but what you’ll ever do with an Indian slave — or peon — I can’t think!”

Then we just laughed — both of us. It all seemed too incredible and not exactly real. At last I leaned over and put my arms around her. I wasn’t bothering about

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Red Thunder and knew she wasn't either. Right there, the big adventure had jumped into my mind.

"Mother," I said, "am I pretty big now — bigger than you?"

She said yes, I was. She really had to, looking at the length of my legs.

"And old?"

"If seventeen's 'old.'"

"I'm nearly eighteen. And I'm strong and able to take care of myself. I've been away at school — and see what I did when the boat burned."

She pulled herself away from me. "What are you trying to wheedle me into?"

My heart went pit-pat at my plan: my cheeks must have blazed so they squelched their freckles.

"Mother, make me your agent, or whatever it is — let me go west and settle this estate and see about the Pomo Claim."

She leaped off the bed — then sank down on it again.

"The idea!" she said. "How can you ever think of such a thing?"

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But I could see she'd thought of it, only she didn't want to. "I promised Mr. Henderson I'd deliver his will," I reminded her.

"Nonsense!" she says. "Besides, you have delivered it — to me." I guess she saw visions of wild prairie and benchland, unbroken trails and Indians.

"Let you go across the plains alone — at your age?"

"Other boys, my age, are doing it every day." — We all knew that.

"You won't! I won't have it! And how would you get the money to go?"

"We can raise that, I judge, once people get to know about the Claim."

"Not much more than the actual price of the journey, I doubt. Then how would you live out there while you were investigating and so on — if you could ever get as far as California, which really isn't likely, and if this claim has any gold on it, which I don't more than half believe. And if it hasn't, how would you pay back what you'd owe?"

I reminded her she'd said we'd have to work somewhere, after Judge Minchen foreclosed that mortgage,

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and that meant borrowing money which'd take a long time to pay off. I told her, too, how they all said Captain Sutter was giving his blacksmith ten dollars a day wages.

She looked at me, sort of glowing for a minute; but, next, she looked across the room at nothing at all, the way she did sometimes, and shook her head. "I don't think you'd make a very good blacksmith," she says. "And if wages are high, so is living. I've read that your Captain Sutter gets \$500 a month rent for one of the two-story houses inside his fort. No" — she stooped and kissed me and fair ran for the door — "the best place for you to go is to sleep. Nobody can do anything just yet, anyhow — and I shan't make any plans till I've got an opinion on these things from somebody whose opinion's worth having. Don't say a word to me about it till then."

I didn't — but I didn't have to wait so long, either. I might as well get by quick-in-the-telling the unpleasant things — that is, the legal ones about poor Hanby.

They held a coroner's inquest on his corpse, and started an investigation before the funeral — and nothing,

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so I heard away later, ever came out of that. The only way those proceedings ever affected mother and me was this: in the course of them, we had to let loose a little concerning the dead man's papers, so pretty soon the news ran like a prairie fire along the river — by the day Henderson was buried, which was the day before our mortgage-foreclosure was due, everybody was talking about Hanby's will — and his partner's. I reckon that was how Aaron Acker heard of it.



CHAPTER X

“SOMETHING QUEER”

I'D been moping in the back-yard after supper. There was something going on in mother's mind — doubt and belief fighting there, I now guess it was, but then I couldn't see anything but her doubt, or her downright disbelief in the Claim. She wouldn't listen to another word out of me about what she called my nonsensical scheme, I knew, so I was guarding my silence, but I never liked waiting, and I'd left the house — so's to have a regular, first-class, A-1, sulk to myself.

I thought up a hundred arguments to present to her — and knew I'd forget them as soon as ever she'd change her policy and let me talk. I wondered about Uncle

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Roger and the Pomo Claim — I was sure it was worth millions. Then I began guessing about who Jake Wickwire might be and what he could have to do with it. And then — old as I was — I got to kind of dreaming about Leather Stocking, who wasn't real, and Kit Carson, who was, and Indians a sight different from Red Thunder: dreaming with my eyes open, as you might say, about such fascinating things, and how now — if mother didn't change her mind — I'd never really see them, when I heard, almost without knowing it, our front-gate click — and, a couple of seconds later, a knock at the house-door.

Just along at first, I didn't pay much attention. I was so let down by not having been sent west that I didn't much care about anything else and — I've got to admit it to my shame — I was angry at mother for not seeing things the way I did. I figured, anyhow, whoever'd come in would be only Miss Lucy, or one of the neighbors, snooping around. So I went on sort of nursing my wrath.

That never gets you anywhere. If I'd worried less about myself, I might have heard more — or, leastways,

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quicker. As it was, I lost a good ten minutes. Still, the way things happened, I did get along at last by the parlor — and then I woke up.

Voices were coming out of one of the open windows, as plain as Judge Minchen's voice had come up from the hall to the spare bedroom on the night when Hanby Henderson died. Only this time they weren't the Judge's and mother's: they were mother's and some other person's.

That other person was saying:

“ Yo' don' think my price is good enough, ma'am? But yo'd ought to consider two things: it saves yuh a heap o' trouble, an' all I get's a mere gamble — for, like as not, there's no gold out thar at all. The resk's entirely mine.”

Not the Judge's voice; but, just the same, a voice I thought I knew. I went bang up to that window.

“ I don't want to sell,” mother was saying. — The loss of my father's estate certainly had opened mother's eyes to business-methods!

“ Why not, ma'am? ” asks the caller.

Then was when I came in at the window! I got a hold

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of the sill, took a vault and lit a full four feet into our parlor.

“We’ll never sell anything to you!” I said.

Yellow-faced Aaron Acker, all togged out in fresh flashy clothes, was sitting on one of the best horsehair easy-chairs in our parlor, with a new silk hat in his hand, talking to mother as suave as life. That is, he was doing that till I appeared. At sight and sound of me, he was up like a jack-in-the-box when its lid is raised.

“Dan!” said mother; she was reproofing me for being rude to a caller.

But what I saw was only that Acker’s face kind of palsied, even if he did put out one hand with what was meant to be heartiness. “Why,” says he, trying to smile, “ef yo’ ain’t the young gen’man I seen on *The Mississippi Belle*. I’m right glad to congratulate yuh fo’ gittin’ off safe.”

“Not in the boat you stole,” I answered him back.

“Mother,” I said, turning away, disgusted, from the hand he offered me, “this is the gambler who cheated Mr. Henderson; and it was this fellow’s friend who knifed him — the man I told you about: with the goitre.”

“ SOMETHING QUEER ”

Acker gave something that was half-way between a yip and a snarl. Like it had done that time on the boat, all his cheap slickness slid away from him. “ I never seen that man 'fore I got aboard,” he swore — “ an' I ain't laid eyes on him sence! ”

But it didn't go down. Mother understood me now. Seemed's if she all of a sudden understood a lot more. She had a little catch in her throat, and her eyes opened wide. Then she got herself under control, and she says, very calm.

“ I think you had better tell all that to the authorities. They are right anxious to talk to you — Mr. Acker.”

She was a fine woman, mother. The way she stood up, with her lace-mitted hands crossed in front of her, and her chin in the air — Acker wasn't any match for her. He didn't try to be: he wheeled on one heel and bolted out of the house.

I was for running after him.

“ Stop! ” said mother.

“ But — ”

She took me by both shoulders. She was changed —

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she was on fire, the way I'd been when I asked her to let me go west.

“ You must inform the authorities, of course. But there's another errand you must do, Dan. Don't you see there's something very queer about all this bid of Acker's? Didn't I tell you I wouldn't do anything about that claim till I had an opinion on its value — an opinion I could trust? Well, he's given me his opinion — and I trust it.”

At first I couldn't follow her. “ Trust him? ”

“ Not him — it. He's been to California, and he knows about these things: I believe he's seen this very claim and knows it's good. He's a bad lot — anybody can see that — he'd do anything for money, and he wouldn't offer any of his own money for anything that he didn't think there was hundreds and hundreds of times more money in. — Dan, the Pomo Claim's all that Mr. Henderson and your Uncle Roger thought it was — Acker is sure of it, and so I'm certain of it now! ”

I was so plumb excited I couldn't answer. I might have known mother's common sense would solve the riddle

“ SOMETHING QUEER ”

right if I only gave it time. She ripped that oil-skin pouch from inside her dress and shoved it over to me.

“ We’re saved,” she said, still glowing. “ We can get Judge Minchen to postpone foreclosure if we offer him shares in this — we can get back all your father’s estate — and goodness only knows what else we can’t do. I don’t believe in the Judge’s good faith any more, but we must put reliance in his legal knowledge, for he’s the only lawyer in town and knows everything about your Uncle Charley’s will. Take these to his office — he’s there nights as well as days — get his opinion as to whether Mr. Henderson’s will is properly drawn and if I am his heir. If he says yes, tell him to come right over here to see me: I’ll arrange the rest!”

Go? To tell you the truth, I did give information to the authorities about Acker being in town — though it never did them any good, or him any harm — but I didn’t attend to that till the next day. Fact is, I clean forgot about it that night. Instead, I ran lickety-split over to Judge Minchen’s place — faster than I ever went anywhere.

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There was a light in his office. Inside no time, I was standing in his musty, dusty den.

“Hello!” he says, looking up from across a flat-top desk, covered with green oil-cloth and piles of papers. “Come to see me, eh? — And didn’t stop to brush that red head of hair! — Well, I was jest thinkin’ of goin’ over to talk to your maw about this inheritance folks tell me she’s come into.”

He was a thin man — nowhere more than ten inches through and a foot wide — and his mouth sagged at the corners, and he always tried to wear that sour-apples look; but his expression changed considerable in spite of himself when I told him the whole of my story. His little eyes got as bright as they could; he asked me a stack of questions I couldn’t half get the drift of. His hands shook while he held the papers close to his face, to study them careful, and he seemed to hate to give them back to me.

“Is that will legal?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he says, very short.

“And mother’ll come into what it leaves — she being Uncle Charley’s heir?”

“ SOMETHING QUEER ”

The Judge bowed his head.

Then he began to talk tarnation fast. He said that, California being Henderson's proper place of residence, this will would have to be probated — or whatever they might call it out there — in California, like Uncle Roger's was, and, times and the country being dangerous, it had certainly better be carried by a personal representative of the legatee, that is, mother, who could take formal possession of the claim and wind up my uncle's estate for her.

“ It's a long journey out there,” says he, his mouth going down at its corners again; “ an' arduous; but, fo' the sake o' my friendship with your late father, I'm willing fo' to draw up a power-of-attorney and undertake the trip.”

I caught his little eyes — and they closed. Then I was more sure about him than ever. If he went west for us, he'd sure, somehow, manage to own that claim before he came back to Heliopolis — and there wouldn't be anything left at all for mother! Every bit of my resolution came back to me. I couldn't see how I'd ever wangle it, but I said:

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“Thanks, Judge — only I’m going myself.”

He jumped. “What?”

“You aren’t deaf, Judge,” I said, sort of enjoying the way he looked.

He said, his mouth working over the question: “Do you mean it?”

“Mean it! Blame it, of course I do! Mother’s going to give me that power-of-attorney — or whatever’s necessary.”

“You’re plumb crazy!” says he.

“Mebbie,” I told him — “but I’m going.”

Judge Minchen fidgeted and got all white around the gills. Then he cleared his throat, and he actually meant what came out of it: “I suppose you’ll sell this-here Indian, to raise the cash?”

“Sell Red Thunder?” That idea hadn’t come to me, and I wouldn’t hold to it. “Not much!”

“Well, then, my boy, who do you think’s goin’ to finance your journey?”

If he’d asked that question a minute before, he’d have had me; but now he was just that minute too late. When he closed his eyes that time when he was offering

“ SOMETHING QUEER ”

to go himself, it showed me he was the swindler I'd got to think he was — and a coward to boot. I remembered what I owed to mother, being her only child and a strong young fellow, and, without choosing one of the words beforehand, I said to him:

“ You're going to finance me, Judge — because if you don't, mother's going to hire a lawyer up at St. Louis to look into all the things you've done with my father's property.”

I'd never said such a thing before, and I might have dropped it even then, if he'd stood up to me like a man — but he didn't. He opened his mouth to bluster, only he didn't get very far. I must have looked like business — and I could thank my ruffled red hair this time, for making me look even madder than I was. Anyhow, I must somehow have made him think, too, that mother wasn't any longer a woman he could trick — and he couldn't afford a court-inquiry. He didn't admit he'd embezzled or mal-administered the Frost estate — he stuck to that. Still, he compromised, and, just then, I wouldn't have asked any better of him.

“ You're nothin' but an excitable boy,” he finished up,

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wagging his head and smiling the wrong way, "but I don't want to see your father's only son run into a lot of debt through litigation. There's one way I can help prevent that: ef you an' your maw'll guarantee me a chance at a fair profit on the investment, perhaps, after all, I can find the money fo' you."

It was as easy as that — he was so scared by a firm threat. He came squirming around. I read his mind like a First Reader — at last. He'd provide the money for my expenses and to make good the option — at usury, of course — and then, if I succeeded, he'd profit, whereas, if I failed, the house would still be security and he'd at least have gained time to cover his tracks — and maybe, too, I'd be killed on the way.

"Will you hold off the mortgage and advance mother enough to live on comfortably while I'm out there?" I asked him.

He would. Gladly. And he'd get me a certified copy of my Uncle Charley's will and arrange all the other legal details. "And you can join a reputable party fo' the crossing of the continent," says he — "and, once ar-

“ SOMETHING QUEER ”

rived, you can go straight to a fust-class lawyer: I've got a friend who's one in 'Frisco.”

I made up my mind that that lawyer'd be the last person I'd visit on the coast, but I didn't bother to tell Minchen so. I didn't tell him to come right around to see mother, either: I'd started as good arrangements as she could make, and she needn't see the Judge till tomorrow. I just told him good-night, and hurried back to her.

She was still in our parlor, where I'd left her, sort of studying over things. I poured out all I'd done.



CHAPTER XI

WESTWARD-BOUND

WELL, there's no use going into all mother's protests. Worst of all, perhaps, was her idea that, if anybody went, it ought to be herself, but with that I really had to show a firm hand.

“Mother,” I insisted, and I remember how I pulled myself up to my top height and looked as stern as I dared: “I am the man of the family, and it's a man's place to go, or, if you like it better, a boy's. Because, after all, a boy — 'specially a skinny boy like me — can get places where nobody else can get, sometimes, and it's a rough journey — not too rough for me, but a lot too rough for any woman.”

WESTWARD-BOUND

Still, I couldn't have met even that except for one thing: bad as she hated to part from me, she did sort of sneakily want me to go, if only to show how much she believed in her own son. Of course, too, she came of pioneer stock, and she was as willing to admit I was built out of the same wood as she was anxious, for my sake, mostly, to mend the family fortunes. Besides, she was sensible enough to see that youth was very much in my favor. It was a war finally between her mother-fondness and her mother-pride; but her mother-pride listened to my arguments, backing them up, I reckon, with better ones of its own — and, away late in the night, I won.

“Don't you bother, mother,” I told her, for in the end, she half laughed and half cried as she gave me her consent, “I'll get there safe, and I'll get there before the option expires.”

This reminded her of something.

“No,” says she, all fluttery again of a sudden, “you can't go. Nobody must go. I'm right ashamed of myself for not thinking of the reason before. Those poor, ignorant Indians: they don't know the value of what

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they're selling — and it would be plain robbery to buy at their price.”

That stumped me — only, while my stomach went down to my shoes, something happened that stumped mother. If we'd forgotten those Indians as a tribe, we'd forgotten Red Thunder as being one of them.

“No,” he said, with a world of decision in his tone. “Pomos give promise — Pomos sell.”

How long he'd been listening in the hall he never told, but anyhow here he was, come up to the door in his quiet, moccasined feet.

“Oh!” said mother, and gave a startled jump.

And then what he added was another surprise. He said he was the Pomo chief's son, as good as kidnapped by Hanby and, once in a slave-country, a slave. Well, as the chief's son, he could give his word, and did, that his father'd be satisfied with fifty percent of any mine's profits, for his people, if his son was returned safe and sound. He'd learned a lot, Red Thunder had: when mother told him she'd free him and he could go, he plain declared he'd be seized by somebody else, no matter what manumission-certificate we gave him, as soon as he struck

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the Great Trail. What chance would there be for a lone Indian travelling there?

“Must go like slave with master,” he said. “Ma’am get gold, if gold there. Never son of Pomo chief break promise.”

That settled it. The next couple of days weren’t anything except preparations for our start. Judge Minchen kept his word, for a change, and drew up all the necessary documents of identification and authorization, and these, along with the papers Henderson had left, mother sewed inside one of the two flannel shirts she sat up nights making for me.

“And here’s needle and thread,” said she: “sew them in again every time you’ve washed a shirt — and don’t forget that shirts have to be washed!”

The Judge even brought around the money, though you could see it made him almost sick to do it, and he went with me while I bought a money-belt, made specially by the blacksmith, to carry the bills in, next my body. He said: “You’ll see I’ve marked a little *x* in the upper left-hand corner on the face of each one — if you look right close. It’s always a good plan fo’ to have your

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money marked in case of having to claim it after a loss.”

I hardly looked at the marks, or remembered about them, for mother was right away on to me again with things to carry. Socks, underclothes, a bottle of her home-made liniment — for all her own pioneer experience, she'd have loaded me down with enough to break a horse's back, if I hadn't called to mind Hanby's advice about travelling light, and stood pat on it. I promised we'd outfit at the real point of departure, where the store-keepers knew exactly what was needed; but I did take the pocket-diary she gave me and told me to write in every day so's I could give her, when I came back, a full account of everything that went on. That old diary's beside me now!

I've said nothing much happened before we left Heliopolis, but one thing did — only I decided not to let mother know about it, so's she wouldn't fret — nor the authorities, either, because they'd shown they weren't any use anyhow and might just want to hold me and Red Thunder back to swear to warrants and then “await developments.”

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The thing was this: that Indian, being red, had followed Acker when he left our house and seen him make for the river, where he caught a boat — and Red Thunder said he was sure Acker meant mischief. He was going to try to beat us out there and jump the claim, or cheat the Pomos out of it, or be on hand when the Henderson-Rowntree-Frost option lapsed — midnight of November 1st, that was: a date I was likely to remember — so's to be ready to buy it in, providing mother hadn't sent any representative, or if the representative happened to be late or wounded too much to be there, or maybe killed on the way.

“Go fast,” says the Indian. “Must go fast, us!”

Talking of pride, I'd been all swelled up with it; but this let a little out of me. Of course, we were to travel by Kansas and the Platte, as quickest, largely along the route Frémont had travelled and that this year so many of the gold-seekers were following; but now Red Thunder — who'd had it all worked out, like so much writing on bark — said we'd ride ponies, drop my idea of a pack-pony, and speed forward from one slow-moving wagon-train to another, swapping mounts with less hurrying

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folks as we went. The clothes on our backs, my one extra shirt and another pair of boots, guns with three hundred rounds of ammunition, revolvers with fifty; enough coffee to fill our saddle-bags, some salt and our blankets — that was about all we'd carry. As things gave out, we'd have to buy at the rare forts or from other pilgrims on the way. This was our final private plan.

There are some things a body can't write about even after a good many years, and how mother said good-bye to me is one of them. She wouldn't come down to the landing with us — we were to take a boat, of course — not wanting the whole population to see her farewell; so she kissed me at our front-gate, and Red Thunder proved himself enough of a white man to turn his back while she did it.

When we started through the white, sleepy town, I don't mind saying my spirits, which had been so high during most of the get-ready, fell mighty low. The back streets were mostly empty, except for a pig or two munching at stuff that ought to have been outside the kitchen-entrances instead of where it was, and even in front of the stores there were only such men as

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had to stay there to look after them — and they were sitting on chairs tilted against the walls, whittling, or reaching inside after brown jugs with corn-cobs for corks. Still, even these folks called out “ Good luck ” to me and made me stop and shake hands, and I got ’em to shake hands with Red Thunder, too. Everybody by now knew a good bit of what was going on, the way they do in any little town, and by the time we reached the water-front we were sort of ready for a regular ovation.

Got it, too. The levee was crowded, and the stone-paved wharf — respectables and loafers, broadcloth and jeans and rag-tag-bobtail; even the town-drunkard, Ike Hitchins, and Miss Lucy Landis with all those cronies of hers, came to see the last of us, like we were a funeral. Barefoot boys were sitting atop the piles of freight, and the minister, Rev. Herbert Dobbins, was on hand with a Bible for me, and my old Sunday School teacher that I used to be in love with when I was eleven, with her new class hanging around her and admiring the Indian and envying me; and Judge Minchen with a starched white lawn necktie and more good advice.

Then — I kept on smiling as if the smile was fastened

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to my face, but a kind of mist hid them all, just the same — the boat came around the bend, and we got aboard, and in ten little minutes we were off. The whole crowd shouted fit to kill:

“ Good-bye, Danny! — Good luck to yuh! — Bring back lots o’ gold-dust! — Lot o’ nuggets!”

And I could hear Mr. Dobbins: “ God bless you, Danny Frost!”

But pretty soon, we had swung into the yellow stream, and their voices faded and died. What I heard calling now was something else. It was California, partly explored for the first time by Cabrillo in the far-off 1540’s, occupied by the Spaniards in 1768, trailed by Mexico through the blood and the dust of her revolutions, forgotten by Europe, surrendered to the United States at last, and here in 1849 sending up a cry that went from the Atlantic to the Pacific — across the mountains and the prairies — across the seas of all the world — a cry that brought men from thirty nations, to suffer and win, succeed and fail, dare death and whip it, or dodge it and die:

“ Gold! Come and take it away — gold!”



CHAPTER XII

ON THE ROAD OF ADVENTURE

FROM the minute we left that boat and headed west, we were in the advance-guard of the great American Exodus, and there seemed no end to that, stretching, as it did, like a long caterpillar, broken in spots by some giant's thoughtless tread, all the way from the Atlantic to the Pacific, but never so lifeless that it didn't keep on moving. I kept my diary, like I'd promised, writing beside our camp-fires, but it was tough work, and sometimes I'd let it slide for a while, only I'd always get sorry pretty soon and bring it up to time.

There isn't a man who made that trip between '49 and the end of the '50's but what likes to talk it over again

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and again, the way an old soldier loves to brag about his campaigns; still, a fellow has got to think about his listeners: folks that lots happened to get to believing everything that happened to them is as important as everything else. So I make a fair-sized jump in time and space and begin again with Red Thunder and me past the North Platte timber-belt — already old friends with the enormous, level plains and the endless winds of the rolling prairies — beyond Fort Laramie — far out on the Big Trail — the Overland Trail — and “traveling light” so’s to arrive the quicker.

I never after had a horse I liked as much as I liked the bay pony I had just then: “Eagle Feather” I named him — and Red Thunder’s “Johnnie” was a rare blood, too. Our only equipment was what my Indian had said, besides a sizable canteen apiece and one of those horn-handled Bowie-knives for each, which were new then, but popular; while, along with my rifle, I toted the weapon we still spoke about as a “revolving pistol,” of the type Samuel Colt had patented only fourteen years before.

Red Thunder wore the buckskin clothes he’d always

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worn, but I'd thrown away one pair of boots and'd bought a pair of stoggy boots to finish-off the pioneer effect of my woollen army-shirt and rough coat. All my pride was back with me, singing in my veins; I was more freckled than ever, twice as happy, and used to a share of hard knocks, though we hadn't had any real hard luck so far, and we were more than half way there.

We loped along most of the time, and Eagle Feather and Johnnie enjoyed the freeness of it all as much as we did. Ants and green-head flies were considerable nuisance sometimes, but we beat the mosquitoes, at night anyway, by sleeping on the smoky side of the fire — though it near strangled me at first. Otherwise, everything seemed right: mother's fortune as safe as if I were on the spot already, and here what they call the Lure of the West was all around us.

Indians? I recollect asking at one of the lonely posts about them, for I was disappointed at having met only "friendlies" so far, and none too many of them. And the old scout I talked to answered:

"You dasn't say as how not seein' t'other kind's any sign they ain't thar."

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The Horse Indians did about as they pleased west of Council Bluffs, and, beyond that, all the way to Fort Laramie certainly, Sioux, Pawnees, Crows, Mandans, Arapahoes and Cheyennes owned the country among them. He said:

“I reckon you can afford to wait, son. I reckon if you once set eyes on a war-party, you’ll sort er wish you’d waited some longer. Big ructions, war-parties generally is.”

Well, we weren’t to see any war-party then or for some time after; we just moved on as if we had the right of way. What we did see in the plains were villages of prairie-dogs, their sentinels alert and on the lookout for us, and, from time to time, the coyotes of the sage-brush, all gray, with their bushy tails between their legs. Funny, slinking creatures they were, and when you caught sight of one of them, which means when he caught sight of you, he’d lift his lips in a snarl, give you the evil eye and trot confidently a bit-way off. Then he’d sit on his hunkers and look you over just out of range of your gun. Sometimes he’d bark, to dare you, like—sharp and hard, as if he really wanted to laugh at

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you, but hadn't quite enough laugh inside of him to succeed.

By days, you could get used to civilization sliding behind you, and you were glad for the quantities of black-tailed deer and wild turkey and big horn sheep, the fish and the plover and the sort of easy generosity; but at nights, bivouacked, with your boots off to unswell your feet, it gave you an eerie feeling. It was so still after the big red sun went down, and yet through that stillness you gradually knew that things were watching you.

Sometimes it was a pair of eyes like twin fires in the moonlight — nothing more. Then, when the night-noises did finally start, they were as deafening as the stillness had been solemn: owls that hooted and whippoorwills that moaned dismally and the clicky chorus of those coyotes barking their crazy heads off, and, in the pretty close distance, the long-drawn-out howls of wicked gray wolves.

Back toward Council Bluffs and Grand Island, the caravans had all looked perky and smart, but after that they weren't very long what you might call enticing: I mind we passed one sick-looking train of men, and

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women in big sunbonnets and hollow-eyed children that made me have to turn my head away before I could get up a grin of "howdy." The men were dragging at their hand-carts, almost asleep as they walked with their heavy black-snake whips clutched in their hands: their eyes were sort of fanatic and turned straight ahead. We passed plenty of broken wagons, too, as we went on, and cast-off furniture like mahogany sideboards, and sometimes even a cross, all weather-worn and crooked, that marked a grave everybody'd soon trample over. Maybe it was things like that that gradually made you think more, nights, and got you jumpy.

There wasn't much chance of losing your way, because that great, one-way road was already deep cut, and where it didn't happen to be clear, it was anyhow kind of roughly sign-posted through the grass. That was true right then all the way from Iowa City to Laramie.

Mighty little later, things were better still, or so I've heard tell. First the track got to be 'most like a country-lane back home, and then like a turn-pike. That was a time of big change in America: even while my Indian and I rode on our long way, far behind us the central

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and eastern states were pouring men in our general direction; sailors ran off, for California gold, from their ships in New York harbor and worked across the continent — soldiers deserted out of the Army — clerks resigned, storekeepers closed up over night. Single men and whole families hurried westward, till the Overland Trail looked as if half the nation had packed up and begun to move its traps and then, as they went along and things got hard and harder, threw away anything that turned out to be excess baggage — anything, from European grand pianos to bags of United States mail.

Anyhow, for our trip, the mere finding of the way, or keeping to it, was easy enough, unless you took it into your fool head, for one cause or another, to wander too far to right or left — and that wandering was my first trouble. You'll read in the histories how many a fellow left his bleached bones somewhere nigh the course; there were a hundred reasons for it — sickness, Indians, starvation and what-not — but the most likely reason was getting off the course. Well, more than once Red Thunder and I very nearly left our bones there, too.

Big things grow out of little. My first difficulty

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started with a crazy desire to chase a pair of long ears “over the hills and far away,” and then got worse because I ran plump into a swollen river at a point where fording wasn’t feasible. Here’s how it happened:

One morning — at this distance of time, I can’t tell you just how long it was after we’d made our real start — I, riding a little ahead of the red man, saw something perched on a sort of mound off the route and, say, a hundred yards distant. It was a rabbit — and yet it wasn’t like any rabbit that ever I’d set eyes on before. Gray it was and fair enormous, compared with any I’d ever hunted around old Heliopolis, and it had a pair of enormous ears that were waving backward and forward, while it looked at me, just exactly like deaf-and-dumb people talk with their hands. A jackass-rabbit — a “jack,” some call it — and common enough out there; but, as I’m telling you, it beat all my previous experience in the breed. Well, I was still boy enough to feel that I had to have it.

“Looky there!” I yelled.

I don’t know what Red Thunder said, but I up with my gun and fired.

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A hit? Not much! That beast acted like he had invited my shot and was ready for it beforehand. He just threw back his ears, turned a somersault and made lickety-split in the direction of some gnarled sage-brush perhaps an eighth of a mile northward.

What did I do? What would you? I rode after him.

Red Thunder — I could hear him grunting disapproval now, but I wouldn't stop — followed me. We actually came within a couple of yards of the jack where he thought he was hidden because only the tips of those listening ears poked out. But then, just as I was sure I had him, he realized his danger and up and streaked a trail like blue lightning in and out of the almost impassable undergrowth.

I gave a shout of disappointment and continued the chase, the Indian glumly behind. That long-eared, long-legged, jumping-jack rabbit was a regular will-o'-the-wisp, and led me on and on with his unexpected hops and leaps for a good two hours or more and until we'd travelled more tangled miles than I cared to consider. Then Eagle Feather drew up short and nearly cata-

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pulted me into that swollen river which I hadn't guessed existed on account of the thick vegetation, and the rabbit gave what I'd have bet was a sort of laugh and disappeared forever. I turned in my saddle, my face still hot from the chase, to front my disapproving, but plumb exasperatingly cool companion.

Fortunately, it was not yet noon: we had time, if we wanted, to retrace our tracks. What was unfortunate was that we didn't retrace them.

For it occurred to me we might as well, difficult as it seemed, cross the river here and regain the road on the opposite side. In fact, the river had got to be crossed anyhow, and just here it curved in a way that a very decided cut-off looked likely if we tried by this process. Red Thunder was doubtful:

“Boy too much dare.”

I pointed out the advantages of the curve, however, and the young Indian — who had, after all, the red man's liking of go-and-see-it pretty strong in him — finally agreed, especially as, only a little distance from this point was the rotting carcass of a swift-built canoe, evidently intended for the same purpose. Anybody

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could see we weren't the first to travel this practically unhewn road.

After eating lightly and letting the animals graze nearby — they were so much our personal friends by now that there was no need to fasten them — we tested the river enough to discover that wading was impossible. So we decided to throw together a raft, which would hold our always light baggage — you remember just how light that was — and swim over, dragging this after us. There were fallen trees aplenty, and we, as pioneers, were provided adequately with the means of cutting these. It took us some time and a lot of energy to select and chop sufficient of them in shape, but we got this done while the day was still young, covered our rude vessel — held together with cord of which we had stacks of course — with dry twigs to keep our traps dry and then looked the whole thing over — myself, at least, with satisfaction.

That river was a yellow, muddy stream, choky-looking — worse for a swim than the Mississippi at its worst, though naturally a whole lot narrower. Still, we got ready for it. Red Thunder grunted — and stripped. He tied his clothes in a neat bundle to a section of the raft

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that promised to stay dry. I did likewise. Then he gave his low call, to which I'd grown familiar enough, for Eagle Feather and Johnnie to come join us, and they ambled in our direction with wonder in their big, friendly eyes: it took some coaxing to make them see that they must swim the stream with us even if they hated the job as badly as we did.

How, in the end, we managed our business will always remain a mystery to me, for, once in mid-stream, we found ourselves in a current of such force that we could only just struggle against it. There was one long minute when I hesitated whether to go back or forward, for to go on seemed about as dangerous as to retreat: I heard the snort of Eagle Feather close to my ear, his breathing heavy and angry, and I could see, once, as I raised my head, the Indian's sinewy muscles desperately twisting. However, I did go ahead, and then it was he who, first on the farther bank, hauled us all — raft and horses and me — to firm ground.

Firm? There was the trouble of it. It was firm on the oasis where we landed. We got out breaths, dried and dressed and out of the corners of our eyes saw the

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horses shaking themselves back to some sort of comfort. Then the Indian seized my arm and pointed.

Johnnie, still panting, had wandered only a few yards from us. He was pulling himself with difficulty out of a mass of thick, yellowish mud. He scrambled to us and stood stock still, with a look of sort of penitence for mischief on his long, frightened face. The Indian took a few steps to right and to left, sniffed, looked about him suspiciously.

“Swamp,” he said. “All swamp.”

I glanced at the horses — at the treacherous river.

“Must we go back?” I asked, my heart in the boots I had just drawn on.

Red Thunder did some quick reconnoitering.

“Boy stay here. Me find way. Else back.”

I settled down with our accoutrements. Eagle Feather and Johnnie installed themselves under a clump of willows, where some tufts of inviting grass drove any melancholy from their minds; my own mind wasn't so serene by a long shot.

Minutes passed — and quarter-hours, and half. Twilight began to fall, a slow, sickish twilight, and I be-

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came anxious out of all proportion. Also, the gnats and mosquitoes kept me on the jump. Had something happened to Red Thunder?

I grew sort of desperate about him. I felt certain-sure he needed me.

Leaving the horses loose, just telling them to wait there, I moved a few yards inland. Not a sound. I could see the prints of my guide's feet for some distance, along a solid enough track. I followed as far as I could pick these out, then called. No answer. Not a rustle in that dour foilage all around me with the late afternoon sun's pale rays filtering through sinister-like.

I resolved to go a little farther, but now there was no more sign of the Indian. There were, indeed, several possible apparent trails that held firm in that bog. I noted what seemed to me might be Red Thunder's insignia — a broken twig here, an overturned stone there — and pushed my way along, calling from time to time.

It must have been about then that clouds I had not noticed began to gather with unexpected rapidity. At any rate, all of a sudden, the sun went out and a splash of rain hit my nose. I called again, with all my

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strength. All I got for answer was the distant neighing of Eagle Feather. Then a low rumble warned me that the storm was about to break.

Should I go on? Should I turn back? I continued doubtingly.

I called again a full dozen times. Now the racket of thunder and the rush of the wind through that desolate place made both my voice and any reply to it as inaudible as a shriek in a crazy nightmare. It was as if the sun had never been, and a deluge of torrential rain beat through my coat to my shoulders and blinded my eyes.

I must go back!

Then it was I evidently made my mistake. Dead sure that I was going back in my own steps, I bent my head and struggled against what they call the elements, struggled unseeing, not realizing that the ground was gradually rising until I felt it crumble under my feet and felt myself being helplessly rolled some fifteen feet downward, where I landed in water nearly up to my waist, but on ground that didn't pull me below its surface.

It was no longer my desire to call to give help; I must get help, or help myself.

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I had passed no such spot as this in coming forward: of that I was sure. It came over me with a sort of terror that I had missed my way. I worked with all my power to pull myself up that slippery bank. The water I stood in was cold and oozy.

Meanwhile, the storm moved on; the wind died down, as quickly as it had risen, but as it fell, night fell, too.

It was a good thing I had youth on my side. There was nothing, absolutely nothing to hold on to, and the slimy sides of the bank, which seemed to stretch along indefinitely, offered no foothold. I thought of walking down, along my uncertain waterway, but feared my footing, remembering that look in Johnnie's face and not wishing to meet the fate he had come so near to meeting. A whippoorwill moaned somewhere nearby; in the stillness I heard a frog croak dismally.

I must get out. Changing my position slightly every moment or so was merely temporary relief and doubtful safety. I could now barely make out the darker darkness of the path above me. With a supreme effort — and I bet Gen. Zachary Taylor, now signing papers down at the White House, never made a bigger effort in

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Mexico — I dug my feet and fingers into the bank. It was just crumbling ooze. I fell back, exhausted.

Yet I had to do it.

I took a minute to get back my breath, backed away cautiously step by step, measuring the distance — ran forward. With all my strength I rushed upward, my hands aloft to grasp any possible object. I hadn't much hope of success in that — and yet, just as I despaired, a projecting root that I could not see met one groping hand. It gave me a second to breathe again without slipping backwards, and, having breathed, just the leverage I had to have. I scrambled to solid earth and lay there, panting but secure.

I called, I whistled, I hooted. No answer.

Then, at last, what I took to be the whine of a dog reached my ears. Perhaps he belonged to one of the caravans on the Big Trail, which would mean that here was a short cut to the highroad, as I had foreseen. At any rate, I just determined to try to follow the sound, and come back the next morning to hunt for the animals and my lost Indian.

The path seemed to lead straight toward my new

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friend, for at my call now, I heard him again. Solid ground widened; I must be nearing the farther boundary of the swamp; besides — though I went step by step, all of a shake, to make sure of that solidity — I was joyfully getting up to what I felt sure was human beings when some kind of a quality in the tone of the still fairly far-off animal made my heart fair turn over. It was no longer a whine or a bark: it was a threatening growl — and it wasn't the growl of any dog, either. Though I had never heard that exact sound before, I knew it now. It was some sort of a wolf.

There was I in the night. I was alone, without compass or gun or food — and not a half-mile from me waited that enemy of unarmed and helpless mankind.

Well, you can lay anything you like I didn't budge one step ahead! There were trees about: I took the nearest and shinnied up it. I propped myself at the fork of a sturdy branch against the damp trunk and propped my eyelids as wide open as anxiety against wild animals would let me.

But, as things turned out, that was not a night for

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marauders. Perhaps the storm blotted out, for the time, the scent of human flesh — or the sprinkling of rain that succeeded during the night. Perhaps my halloing voice had not given the location to that beast I had taken for a friendly dog, or, giving it, had found him with his hunger satisfied. Anyhow, if I dozed off and on — how could I help it? — no disturbing nocturnal prowler, either on the ground or with yellow eyes suddenly alight in the branches of my tree, came to throw me broad awake.

It was the first streak of dawning gray through the mass of tree-limbs and vines and brush in which I discovered myself that pushed me to action. I rose, rubbed my legs to get back some circulation and warmth and looked carefully about me.

Nothing; absolutely nothing except sameness on all sides. Stunted trees — sagebrush — rolling country under a dull sky — and all empty. Even the swamp was no longer there as far as I could see, and the second rain, slight as it had been, had removed all trace of my own footprints. Had I come from right or left? Where

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was the bank up which I had so desperately clambered? I hadn't the ghost of an idea!

One thing was obvious: I must find my river. Anything else seemed out of the question now, but if I could only find the river. . . . For that, perhaps I should try to head back for the swamp; but I had wandered farther than I thought; I was no experienced woodsman, and though the day was gray enough to give light, there was no sun to point me location. Besides, I was faint through want of food.

Action, that was the thing. I must act! The trail wasn't anywhere in sight; if I stayed here, I was done for.

I scrambled to the very top of my tree. Its teetering highest branch was not tall enough, and I came back to earth merely bewildered. Some faintly greater light made me assume that, were the sun shining, it would be on my left. Then I must face it, but I should turn half about. I walked rapidly for some miles — in a direction that I now believe was quite mistaken.

And only into a greater wilderness. Finally toward late afternoon, I entered a dip of land between low hills

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— an enclosed arena that frightened me. Surrounded by those hills and a huge strip of bogland — but sheltered from all wind — I was in a very cemetery of bones. White, brittle bones. Some were huge skulls — perhaps of horses or cattle. The others — were they human? Had hostile Indians done one of their horrible massacres here?

Nightfall found me there, and, in the end, unable to make my way out, I yielded to the necessity of staying for the dark hours in that horrible death-valley. I bit back the tears of weariness and vexation. It was at least a sheltered place, and, finally, worn out, I determined to follow a straight line on the morrow which I could no longer discern by the gathering darkness. So, having drunk a little brackish water, I fell into a profound sleep.

It was Red Thunder who wakened me. Quite as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he stood before me in the early dawn of the next morning, with Eagle Feather and Johnnie faithfully beside him.

“ Boy wake up,” he said.

I was very weak. He lifted me to a sitting posture

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and put a tin cup to my lips. Hot coffee! I never knew anything could bring so much life to anyone.

“How, how did you find —?” I began.

He raised a thin, dark finger.

“Boy fool-boy,” said he. “Pale-face must keep road. Only Indian knows woods.”

“Then you weren’t hurt? You didn’t need me?”

He smiled his thin, proud smile.

“Boy need Red Thunder.”

“What’s all this?” I asked, sweeping one arm around.

“This horrible place?”

He followed the curve of my arm, astonished, and not comprehending.

“I mean, was there an — an Indian massacre?”

He must suddenly have interpreted to himself the look in my eyes, for his thin sides shook with laughter. Then he grew solemn again. “Indian massacre? No. Indians not do this. Great Father.”

“What do you mean?” The bones seemed to stretch through several dreary broad acres.

“Bison. Buffalo, all together, like place. Stay. Stay too long. Nice grass. Water. No wind. But one day

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snow come. Snow deep, deep. Bog here — snow there. Buffalo die. Pale face die, too, if fool like that.”

In the end, I found I had not gone so far wrong in actual miles as his silences and gloomy head-noddings were meant to make me believe; but, alone, it was doubtful if I should have succeeded in striking contact with my fellowmen by following the straight line I had resolved upon with break of day. Once more myself — and, though shaky for some hours, really little the worse for my desperate experience — the Indian guided us all out of that vast cemetery and, by devious twists and turns that I should never have imagined, to that highroad I was sure could not be far away.

Almost at once, past the swamp and those woods, we were in the prairies, rolling as far forward as you could see, and as far behind. Red Thunder kept as close to me as I to him, and there was no more lone reconnoitering.

Sometimes we'd come across a rider “reesking it alone” — but I noticed he didn't branch off; sometimes, on the horizon, we'd sight a string of “mule-killer-carts,” maybe another ox-train than the one we'd joined for a

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day or two before forging ahead; but mostly that one would appear like it was the first expedition to break into this new world of grass, far-away elk and the "Curlee-curlee" call of the cinnamon curlews. The change came quietly — the change that was going to make me shake in my skin for mother's Pomo Claim. Red Thunder hadn't joined up steady with any caravan as yet, we were well ahead of schedule as to time, and maybe that wore off the edge from our speed and watchfulness.

Right then it was, while we were following easily those wheel-marks and signs of trappers and gold-seekers, and not but a stone's throw from Fort Laramie, that, first, we came up with a long column of Mormons, headed for Zion, as they called it, and about to strike off south from the main route. They weren't of the original Mormons, of course, those who'd walked this trail in '47, or even the ones that pushed and pulled hand-carts over it, a little afterwards, for these looked a lot more prosperous, though all wasn't going well with them.

For they were rolling a dead man out of his blanket into a pit when we got there, and we stopped and listened as they whispered among themselves that it wasn't

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a properly natural death, and that some stranger, Indian or white, was laying for somebody. It never struck me till long afterwards that that dead fellow bore a breath of resemblance to myself. Anyway, when they invited us to ride along with them, we did, keeping our ponies to the pace of their tired mules and oxen, which started forward pretty soon again to do their ten-miles-a-day stunt — the family plough and the family rifle fastened on the outside of every wagon, ready for war or for work.

They were a kindly lot, even if their religion did worry them a good deal, and we were right sorry when our ways parted, and they turned south toward big Salt Lake, while we went on west. Red Thunder and I had had two days' travel again by ourselves. In the second afternoon, the Indian saw fresh tracks.

“Dan look,” he grunted. He pointed west and held up all his fingers.

He meant there was a party ten miles in front, and so we figured to fetch up with it. But Eagle Feather and Johnnie were both kind of tired, and I was hot, it being still mid-summer weather, so I took a quarter-hour for

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a cool-off in a stream. It was all still and quiet — not a breath stirring, for a wonder, and only emptiness everywhere.

I was just clambering ashore when the Pomo turned his head, sharp, back the way we'd come.

“What's the matter?” I asked.

He answered, without turning around:

“Horse — one horse — riding here. Where he come from?”

He looked a bit puzzled. I couldn't see it, or hear it, either; but I'd got used to his skill at such things.

I began to rub myself quickly with the shirt I'd taken off, and I was dry by the time a horse did show up, and was just buckling my money-belt around me when its rider came to a halt beside us.

He'd advanced, the last fifty yards, at a gallop, sitting as careless as if his horse was a part of him, and singing “Oh, then Susannah” at the top of his lungs, the way men did when they overhauled one another on the Overland Trail — if they were friendly — and now he stopped dead, his mount planting its forefeet steady and the rider not as much as lurching forward.

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“Hello, strangers!” he said, and swung a leg across his Mexican saddle.

We had our guns handy — ’cause you never knew who anybody was — but when I’d made a fair survey of this man, though he was heavily armed, I figured we wouldn’t need them. Tall and rangy, he was, with the clothes of a trapper — except he wore boots — beasts’ skins, mighty well made, with fringes on the sleeves and some sort of animal’s tail, for luck, hanging down at the side of his cap. The stock of a rifle stuck out from under one leg, and a business-like revolver hung on one hip. He had a full beard, tangled and brown, so’s you couldn’t see much of his face, and his eyes were a cold sort of blue, but he smiled very broad, and then you saw how red his lips were and how strong his teeth.

I said: “Hello.”

“Alone?” says he.

“Just my Indian and me. We’re aiming to join-up with a wagon-train that’s a bit-way ahead.”

“Well, I’m solo, too,” he says, “an’ I seen the tracks I reckon yo’-all seen, an’ calc’lated to overtake that thar same train. Ef they ain’t no objection raised to mah

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comp'ny, I'll light an' set yhere with you-all fo' a minute, an' then we'll ride on together. Three's a mo' complete outfit, like, than two er one."

You never refused such a request on the Big Trail, so, though Red Thunder seemed glummer than usual and didn't say anything, I told the man to squat. He said he'd been a trapper, like I'd thought, and a hunter in the Sioux country — was born in Tennessee. In fact, he told us straight away what he said was his "history," so's we could "get him to rights." "But folks calls me Kaintuck' Bill," he says, "though I ain't never crossed the Cumberland." And he asked our names and all about us.

Well, while we sat there, swapping information so to say, and later when he rode on with us, I own I liked him, even if it was plain Red Thunder didn't. He spun a string of hunters' yarns fit to make your hair stand on end, the kind I always liked — and ones that made you ache from laughing, too. By the time we'd brought up with the ox-train, I thought Kaintuck' was a regular hero.

They were camped for the night beside the next water,

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those waggoners. "The Lucky Lot" was the name they had painted on the canvas covers of their outfit, and they were as hard a looking company as you'd care to come across. Their faces were weather-blackened and naturally hard, anyhow; they wore slouch hats and flannel shirts without any coat or vest; their blue pants had yellow buckskin seats and thigh-patches for riding, and most of them sported jangly Spanish spurs to their boot-heels. The Lucky Lot! Seeing how much my lot came to be thrown in with theirs, I'd better say something about them right here.

Early as that, all the expeditions across the plains were run by rules and tactics as firm, you might say, as if they'd been written into the U. S. Constitution in 1787, and they were all governed by the Law of the Road, a sort of wild, legal growth, sprung up like a weed and hardly more'n a baby for age, but as solid as the statutes of the Medes and the Persians that the Bible tells you about. Every train marched the way an army marches through an enemy's country — one of three professional guides was always riding ahead, with a pair of men detailed for scout-duty beside him and other

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scouts on both flanks and bringing up the rear — and at night sentries were posted, and the wagons drawn around in a circle, generally at a spring or a stream, with the horses and cattle safe inside the ring, either hobbled or fastened to picket-ropes, and the company sleeping around low campfires. A train-captain was elected at the start, and him — as long as he stuck to the Law of the Road — everybody was expected to obey. Fine theory, but generally working out more or less loose.

That was how it was with the Lucky Lot, whose captain was Sure-Shot Miller, a veteran of the late Southern Indian wars and then a planter near Tallahassee. He had the hard time most train commanders had.

The people under him were there voluntarily, of course, but all the more grumblingly for exactly that reason — some of them were honest, some were not; but all were violent and wilful. Their talk was the roughest thing a body ever heard. They came from all parts of the country, each bringing his own lingo with him, and each giving some of it to the others, till you could hardly understand it at all. Scholars have a name for their sort:

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“Individualists,” each one wanting his own way. Hardly any was used to military discipline, and they knew they could vote their leader out of office the way they’d voted him in: all the work was done with a grudge or a threat, and, often as not, the sentries’d sleep at their post.

Miller—he was a regular blond giant getting along to the end of his forties—had to act as tough as the skipper of a whaler. I found out later he had a big heart hidden underneath his thick skin, but at the start I set him down for as hard a case as I’d ever seen.

The Lucky Lot took to Kaintuck’, but for the first day or two didn’t like me any better than I liked them, and they were downright suspicious of Red Thunder. the way everybody out there naturally was of an Indian. Still, they were a train that was moving fairly fast, and it was safer for us to be with a train hereabouts than all on our own. Besides, they were simple fellows, for all they were so wild, and when they found I’d read a good many books, some of them gave up card-playing at nights, or singing “Old Grimes is dead” and what not—out of tune, and endlessly—and got me, instead, to

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tell them stories. They'd sit around a fire and listen like a lot of children while I spouted all I could remember out of Cooper and Dumas — with the short-legged coyotes prowling outside the wagon-ring, now and then a close-by one giving a yap, and now and then a distant pack yelling so's it made your blood run cold.

Two nights I had of this — and it went to my head. It's an awful queer intoxication, holding an audience, as they say, with the power of your words, and the faces of these, just because they were simple and uncouth, were so full of interest and admiration that you went on and on. I began to figure that Red Thunder and I were so far ahead of schedule that, especially as they were moving pretty fast, we could afford to trail along with this lot for quite a while. The Indian, though, didn't see it like I did.

“We ride on by ourselves,” he'd urge me, in a whisper, when we rolled into our blankets beside our own fire — in the circle, but a bit away from the older members of the Lucky Lot.

“Why?” I'd ask him. “We've got days and days to spare now.”

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“No man ever have days to spare,” the Indian said. “Red Thunder think bad medicine here.”

Still, I hung on — and my postponing was the thing that got us in trouble.

He'd taken me off for an elk-hunt, and I'd come back swaggering because of the killed animal that lay across Eagle Feather's saddle-bow. I was a lot tireder than I let on, and little things bothered me. Usually, I slept with my money-belt in its place around my waist; that night it chafed me, and when I lay down, I unbuckled the belt and put it under my pillow — which was my saddle.

Being so worn out, I must have slept pretty heavy, and Red Thunder must have been as bad as I was, for he was breathing deep before I dropped off, though mostly he napped as light as a cat. Once I woke, or was wakened, and, between the wheels of the nearest wagon, saw the sentry posted there, curled up in the misty moonlight. I could hear him snoring. All the fires had gone low, but I was too lazy to do anything about it: I remember looking up at the bright stars that seemed awful low overhead; I remember wondering if mother

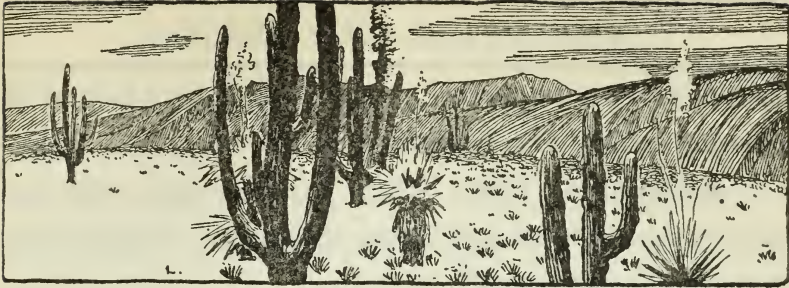
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was awake, back in Heliopolis, and whether she was watching the stars and thinking about me.

“Red Thunder and I’ll push on ahead tomorrow morning,” I thought.

And that was the last thing I did think till the turn-out call woke me for the day, on the heels, it seemed of the “Amen” to the hymn the coyotes always sing to hail the dawn. Then I shoved my hand under my saddle, as if I’d been told to.

My money bag was gone.



CHAPTER XIII

LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

WHAT would become of us now? For a second, I was too out of breath to speak.

It wasn't yet real sunup, but the sky was pink — grayish pink, eastward — and there was plenty of light to see by. Those beginning rays, or rather, glow, tipped and gilded the wall of mountain-peaks far and high ahead of us, so much of a barrier that it looked impossible we should cross them, though cross them we knew we somehow must. Close at hand, where you could look out of the circle — they always left careless gaps between waggons, here and there — the green grass showed under a cool, rising mist, with bright yellow

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flowers scattered among it; inside, the Lucky Lot were yawning noisily and beginning to get up.

I stared at all that. Then I yelled out, with my voice come back to me: "Red Thunder! Somebody's stolen my money-belt!"

I didn't need to yell it — the Indian was standing just behind me, where I knelt by my saddle — but the thing had knocked me so hard I couldn't have talked low, once I'd got my wind, if my life depended on it.

Red Thunder started to speak. He didn't get the words out — my screech had broken through all the racket of that camp get-up-time, and men came running to us from every which-way: some that hadn't got their boots on yet, a couple carrying bacon-spiders, and one of the scouts wrapping his *reata* ("lasso," we called it) around his middle.

They jostled into us. They kicked away the saddle and searched the grass; but they didn't find anything. Then one of them — Hank Turner, his name was: a sawed-off, pock-marked fellow from Maine — says:

"Better search the Indian!"

I about died at that.

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“Don’t you dare to do it,” I said “Red Thunder’d never rob me.”

Hank poked his chin out. “Oh, you think so, do you, Red-head? If he didn’t, who did? Warn’t he stretched out aside o’ you? One o’ us? Trustin’ a Indian an’ doubtin’ o’ whites!”

“We kin settle it in two licks,” somebody else piped up.

Red Thunder stood quiet — the way he did on the *Mississippi Belle* that day at the levee.

“I didn’t say it was any of you,” I told the rest — and more were coming up now to see the fun, though it was not any fun for me, and I knew how hot and red my face must look. Then I picked out Kaintuck’s brown beard among the men and guessed he’d help me. “It might have been somebody following us,” I said.

“Passed us by an’ lit on a striplin’-boy to rob?” says Hank, very sarcastic. “That thief must ’a’ went to sleep hisself. Tol’able likely, ain’t it? Nobody else has missed nothin’. Has they?”

There was a little commotion at that, but then everybody said no, they hadn’t.

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Hank grabbed the Pomo. "Stand around here!"

"Don't —" I began again.

But they all told me to shut up, and went about their job mighty rough, with me standing there hot and helpless. Red Thunder never budged while they did it: he made me ashamed just to watch — and of course they didn't find anything on him either, though you can bet they were as thorough as could be.

"I told you he didn't have it," I said, when they'd finished.

At that, Kaintuck', whom I'd thought my friend, laughed, showing his red lips. "How'd we know this yhere boy ever had any money?" he asked. "Yo'-all an' yo' story-book-yarns!"

It made me mad clean through: why, it wasn't only my friend I'd thought him — I'd thought him even a kind of hero. I walked right to him:

"Do you mean I'm lying?"

He just gave me a great push and laughed again.

"I mean I ain't agoin' to bother mah haid about yo' red one," says he. And he turned to the others: "What

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do we-all know about these two? I'm fo' breakfast, I am."

I was going to answer back that they didn't know anything more about Kaintuck' than they did about Red Thunder and me, especially seeing as we'd all three presented ourselves to the outfit at one and the same time — when big, blond Cap' Miller shoulders his way into the crowd, with his thick eyebrows drawn tight together, and a knife-handle sticking out of the top of one boot. He had a hand on the long navy-revolver that hung from the right side of his belt, hammer forward.

"What's this yhere goin' on?" he roars. "Speak up: what is it?"

Well, we all talked together. I told him how Red Thunder had been searched, too. "An' I says," Kaintuck' wound up, cutting in right after me — "I says the young galoot never had no money nohow — an' 't ain't wuth losin' our breakfas' bacon over."

"I axed fo' fac's," Miller stopped him short awful quick, giving him a kind of jab with his bright blue eyes — "not opinions an' reasons agin' an' fo'. You men," he goes on to the Lucky Lot — every last one of them

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was around by now — “you don’t seem to understand: accordin’ to the Law o’ the Trail, thievin’ from a comrade’s a hangin’ affair. Him as don’ lay by that’s in fer a drillin’.”

“Thar cyan’t be no thievin’,” Kaintuck’ argues back, “when thar ain’t never been nothin’ to steal.”

Cap’ gripped hold of my wrist like to break it. “Do yo’ swear, Dan-yel Frost, as yo’ had this yhere money?” he asked.

I swore to it.

“What’s that thar amount to,” Kaintuck’ growled, “him bein’ jes’ a unowned boy, an’ such bein’ allays plumb busted?”

Hank was under Kaintuck’s influence. So were some of the others. They all growled, too.

“Stop that!” Miller ordered them. “Long as this yhere Dan-yel Frost lays the charge, every last one on us is under suspicion. Well, I reckon we can’t prove he had this yhere money; but we kin prove we ain’t got it. Us an’ our traps kin all be searched — an’ they’re agoin’ to be!”

LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

There was an awful rumpus at that. Everybody said they wouldn't stand it, and Kaintuck' led the chorus with Hank following lead in a good second. They all allowed it wasn't fair they should be treated like thieves and that on account of a no-good boy from nowhere with a savage Indian.

"Arter what this young fellow's said," Miller told them, very determined, "each one o' us is what they call a possible thief till he's proved honest, an' disparagin' o' the ac-cuser don' help matters. Come on now!"

Kaintuck' says: "How kin yo' find out anythin' fer certain?" Those steely eyes of his got colder and colder. "'Course we all got some money on us — an' any right-minded thief'd 'a' throwed the belt away, er buried it. How kin this yhere cub tell his own money from ourn even ef he swears he see it?"

"I swan!" Hank piped. "He's got you there, Cap'n."

"The Red-head jes' wants ter claim some o' our specie," another fellow said — "an' he cyan't have nary a two-cent piece o' mine!"

"Mine nuther!" — "Ner mine!" they all shouted.

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“ He ain’t done nothin’ but tell tales ever sense he joined up with us!”

Red Thunder was a statue on one side of me, and Miller stood on the other side.

“ Yes,” I said, “ I can identify my money — or at least the big bills, the ones I brought from home and haven’t changed.” My, but I was grateful for what Judge Minchen had done about that money he lent me, whatever he’d done to me and mine before! “ They’re all marked,” I said — and I explained how there was a little x in the upper left-hand corner of each one.

“ That’s fair,” Miller declared. “ An’ I’ll be the fust to be searched, myself.”

You’d have thought that would have settled the matter; but it didn’t, somehow — it only seemed like it made things worse — especially for Kaintuck’ and the fellows he’d got to follow whichever way he led them. All over again, they swore at the top of their lungs they wouldn’t stand being searched.

“ Are we-all a crowd o’ jail-birds?” Kaintuck’ asked them.

They began to howl again and sort of surge up to us

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— to Miller and the Pomo and me — and things looked mighty ugly for a minute. I thought sure I'd started a mutiny. One fellow drew a business-like-looking knife, and I saw Kaintuck's right hand creeping toward his holster. Someone sang out:

“What say to lynch the boy an' his Injun: they started this!”

And someone else: “Cap' Miller, ef yo' try thwartin' us, why we'll —”

“Stand back!”

That was the Cap' — and he'd been too quick for them. His one arm had dipped beside me when Kaintuck' started them. Now it flashed up and out — began to move from side to side in a half-circle, deadly calm. There was Miller covering that whole blamed outfit with his long navy-revolver.

“Stand back,” he told them. “Yo' elected me yo' captain, an' yo' cyan't unelect me 'thout a reg'lar puttin' to a vote. Well, long's I am commander o' this yhere shootin' match, I'm agoin' to command. We're all agoin' to be searched like I said we was — me last now, so's to keep yo'-all tamed down durin' the process. An'

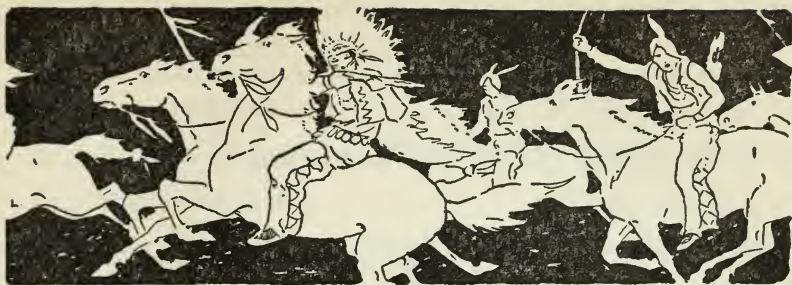
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as fer the galoot as kicks, I reckon my gun'll teach him his manners!"

You could see they knew he hadn't been named "Sure Shot" just for the fun of it. He had them! They didn't dare to fight him, and he shut 'em up when they tried to get back to argument. All they could do was to grumble and mutter low among themselves — and Cap' didn't mind that one mite.

Red Thunder, that they'd searched first, he was delegated to search them — he searched Cap', too, afterwards. Searched the wagons. It was all done the way only an Indian could do it, and it lost us our proper breakfast and near half the forenoon.

But that's all it did do. It just peetered out, otherwise. Not the least trace of those missing bills did we find.



CHAPTER XIV

TRAILED!

IT looked to me like I was worse off than if I'd never raised the alarm. Just as soon as the last wagon was turned inside out, and none of my money discovered, the Lucky Lot, with Kaintuck' openly leading them, came at me again — me and the Pomo. I thought even Cap' Miller eyed me kind of doubtful now, and about the last of the D'Artagnan I had around me oozed down into my boots.

Fighting man-to-man's one thing: two of you facing a mob's another. Red Thunder and I leaned against that wagon's off-hind-wheel, both of us wondering about the same thing, I judge.

“Well,” says Kaintuck', showing those thick red lips

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of his that this morning I'd had to realize weren't so friendly spoken as I'd believed, "we ain't robbers — so who's a liar?"

Red Thunder's bronze face never changed expression, but I felt him nudge me.

"I never said you were robbers," I answered Kaintuck'. "But if you don't want me and my Indian with you, we'll leave your company and ride on — ride away ahead!"

Kaintuck' winked at pock-marked Hank Turner so's everybody could see it, and's much as to say: "What'd I tell you?"

And Hank said:

"No, you don't! You folks stay right along o' us. You're wuth watchin', you air."

I reckon I couldn't have gone far, anyway, at that stage — not without buying supplies from the trains we caught up with, and nobody wanted charity, either to give or to take. I'd only some small bills and silver left: change that was in my pockets. But if these oxen moved slow for the rest of the trip as they'd gone for the last few days — and here was our hardest climbing just

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ahead! — how'd I be in time to get the Pomo Claim before its option expired? That's what I asked myself — and then I thought:

“ Why, it's lost, anyhow! I haven't got any cash now to take it up!”

I was “ travelling light ” now — too light! I could 'most have cried, lanky and long-legged as I was, and maybe Cap' Miller saw what was going on in my mind. Anyhow, his eyes got a bit softer, and he bent down and whispered to me:

“ Did yo' tell the truth, sonny? ”

I whispered back: “ Hope I may die!”

Then he turned on his men and says, in a mighty different voice:

“ This yhere boy's not agoin' away like he wants; but you-all ain't agoin' to devil the life out'n him, nuther. He's lost his money someways, an' I fer one believe him; but him an' his Injun they're agoin' to work out their board an' keep till they git to golden Californy with us, whar they-all was headed fo'.” He kind of caressed the butt of that navy-gun he toted. “ Any objections,” he says, “ will be made to me de-rect.”

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There weren't any — only covered looks: that crowd had learned its lesson not to oppose him. They hoped he might be with them, when the money couldn't be found, but when it couldn't be, and he still half took up for us, the Lucky Lot knew better than to let him see them kick. So we started on again, and Red Thunder and I paid our way in work.

“Can't we do anything to get ahead?” I used to ask the Pomo.

And he used to answer: “If we no reach claim in time, father he sell Acker: he sure there first. If we get there, Red Thunder speak to father-chief, father-chief make option longer. You-me, we watch chance — then we run away.”

“We'll starve,” said I.

“Mebbie starve,” Red Thunder said. “Mebbie shoot 'nough game.”

It sounded possible, but it wasn't as possible as it sounded. Cap' Miller himself, and either Kaintuck' or Hank'd keep us in sight — and in range — all day, Kaintuck' having now regularly joined the Lucky Lot. All night, too, the guards — they didn't seem to sleep on

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duty any more — never took their eyes off us. Somebody'd told them to have us under surveillance, as they call it. While we got farther and farther west, climbing and climbing now, we planned over and over to seize our mounts some night, Red Thunder and me, and ride away; but the sentries looked like they expected that and never gave us the opportunity.

No one, hardly, would have anything to do with us. Why didn't I risk death anyhow, then, and turn back? Everything seemed lost: why didn't I? Well, I just couldn't, and somehow I kept on hoping that money might somehow reappear like it had disappeared. But even if I'd been given the chance by them that was watching me to go back, that queer, magical Call of the West had got in my veins and brain and heart: I'd simply have to go forward.

Time went on, and that wagon-train crept upwards, never over fifteen miles a day, and mostly a lot less. I wondered and wondered and suspected everybody — and at last I 'most lost heart altogether.

You're not to think I was all the time on the wrong side of everybody. They did mistrust me, and they

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kept an eye on me — and on Red Thunder; but some of 'em, like Bill Standish, came of good stock, if he was a Yankee, and they were as sneakingly kind to me as they could be in the circumstances. Besides, I did my work well — carried water — gathered greasewood — all that sort of thing — and, even when the Lucky Lot looked at me sidewise, they had to admit I did my duty, and even some more.

But, fact is, by the time we'd crossed the Rockies — I'd like to stop and tell you about that, with the climbs and descents and easy game, the passes, the sunsets and the sunrises and the feeling so often that you owned the whole wide world! — by the time Snake River and the Salt Lake Desert and all that were way behind us, and we'd struck for the Humboldt region — without a change or a chance for Red Thunder or me — the whole outfit, the way most outfits did about then, had got too tired to stand much more. Food got to be a considerable problem: prairie-chickens were long ago gone, early autumn came on, other game became scarcer and scarcer, and we began killing some of our own scrawny cattle that ought to have been held for later on,

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and besides, that cattle, which wasn't corn-fed anyhow, had need of rest for grazing till they were filled up proper.

We lost a lot of stuff at a ford, besides. Then two or three of the Luckies were taken down with dysentery — one of the guides died of it — and late thunderstorms would wet us, hail freeze us, and then, on those heights, the sun'd bake us alive. Folks got to abusing their animals with their blacksnake-whips — though they didn't dare abuse the Pomo or me in the open — and from that started to abusing one another with their fists. I guess it was mostly nerves. They got so's they couldn't control their nerves, and, being uneducated to begin with, I judge that when the nerves go wrong they're really worse than with the people who were all tingly with them to begin with. At all events, we had some right lively bouts — regular knuckle-and-sculls affairs: they were about the only amusement we did have.

Then, one day all of a sudden, I found out who Jake Wickwire was.

We were trailing through a valley in what the guides

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said was dangerous Indian country, where they said we had got to be careful about burning things: no wet wood, especially, unless it was after dark, because by daytimes that little edging of black smoke would just be a red rag to a bull. We were keeping a good lookout on every side, but going on. It was near sundown, but we wanted to reach a less exposed position before pitching camp. Red Thunder and I were riding in front, beside Cap' Miller when I smelled something unfamiliar. It was sort of like a glue-factory, and then I remembered to have smelled it before, but never with our caravan: an Indian mixture of tobacco, but most of it was the inside bark of the red willow and some leaves taken from a pungent vine. I could see at once that Red Thunder noticed it too, and sniffed toward the rear-end of our train, from which the wind was blowing.

Then along comes Kaintuck'.

“Got an addition,” he says. “New fellow jes' caught us up and wants fo' to join on. I reckon it's all right, but it kinder seemed I'd ought to tell yuh. Queer galoot: calls hisself Wickwire, an' he's got the biggest lump in his throat yo' ever seen.”

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I gave a gulp and looked at Red Thunder. He half-nodded.

“Cap’ —” I started.

But Cap’ Miller wasn’t for conversation with me. He pulled his Spanish horse out of line, to the off-side; turned his head back and waved his big slouch-hat. The stranger cantered to us, bringing that strong pipe-smell closer and closer — and I saw for sure he wasn’t any stranger, as far as I was concerned. He rode a swift sorrel animal, and his dusty clothes were made for the Trail, mighty different from what he’d sported on *The Mississippi Belle*; but there was the shirt-collar open around an enormous goitre, and there were the sunken, drawn cheeks and the pop-eyes with red veins painted on them: Wickwire was Aaron Acker’s friend, the man who knifed Hanby Henderson!

He recognized me, too. I could tell it — and could tell he expected to find me here, for all he tried not to show his cards. I saw him give a funny exchange-glance to Kaintuck’, too.

“Cap’n,” he says to Miller in that hoarse voice of his, “I’ve been in the fur-trade o’ the Rockies fo’ a spell,

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but now I'm sornterin' back to Californy, whar I cal'clate ter — ”

I didn't hear the rest — or want to: I was busy considering a course of action. Kaintuck' and Wickwire were working together. The first had trailed me, the second had probably sneaked in and robbed me; but the first hadn't managed to get me lynched. Now the second was met up with him at this place agreed on beforehand, and the two together would finish the job. They were acting for Aaron Acker, or in cahoots with him — and Acker was somewhere ahead, or all the way in California! If ever anything made me believe in that gold mine, it was the coming of Jacob Wickwire.

Maybe I couldn't get back my money — it didn't look as if I had much hope of that — but if I was ever going to beat that game — and if ever I was going to get through the fog of suspicion hanging over me and be allowed to leave the Lucky Lot — even to leave them — here was time to do it.

Some of the other men were coming up, curious about any stranger, like we all were on the Trail. I pushed Eagle Feather up to Wickwire's roan and said:

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“ So it’s you, is it? ”

Sometimes it’s a good thing to follow your impulse without waiting; but he was prepared for me. He just let his bulging eyes travel over me.

“ Yo’ ’ve got me, young feller,” he says, as if it didn’t matter. “ I never see yo’ afore.”

“ Cap’,” I said, loud enough for them all to hear, “ I know now who it was robbed me. Here he is — and he’s wanted in Missouri for murder!”

Noise? I never heard such a racket!

Everybody yelled at once, like a bedlam let loose — and everybody said I was a no-good young-’un just making trouble with one of my book-stories again. Everybody except Cap’ and Red Thunder and Wickwire, that is. The Pomo edged his mount in beside me; Cap’ Miller’s mouth tightened; but the man with the goitre pulled a pistol — and I was looking into the little hole of its barrel, and into those pop-eyes back of it.

“ I’d hate to kill you,” he drawled, “ but it sure looks like you was obleegin’ me fo’ to do it. — Thar: stand hitched!”

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He spoke soft, in a lull of the noise — so soft that I felt he'd planned all this, and I expected he meant to finish it. He wanted me to denounce him; then, he'd planned, he'd say those words — justifying himself to the crowd for killing me in resentment of my insult — and shoot! All that saved me — for this time once more — was Cap' Miller's authority, and Cap' Miller's lightning draw.

“ Gentlemen!”

He knocked up Wickwire's pistol and covered us both with his own. The crowd recommenced roaring — he held up his big left hand and got quiet.

“ Yo' cyan't go around yhere makin' any mo' charges 'thout bein' held accountable,” he says to me. “ An' you, sir,” he says, scowling mighty hard at Wickwire, “ cyan't administer justice solo. — Hand me over yo' hardware, both o' you. An' you, too, Red Thunder — you belong with this Cain-raiser.”

The Lucky Lot — all but Kaintuck' — liked this. “ That sounds!” they called.

Cap' went on:

“ The truth ought ter be provable. Yo' 're all three

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under arrest — fo' a trial, come mornin', accordin' to the Law o' the Trail."

I gave up my arms with a heavy heart — but Wickwire had to give up his, too. Still he was rarin'-mad at having been thwarted! I thought, what with his goitre swollen up so much, he was like to strangle of disappointment right there before our eyes.

"Very good," he says, "But I've travelled this Trail befo', an' I know that thar law. Young feller, yhere's yo' chance: will yo' withdraw them charges?"

I was mad, too — too mad to be prudent.

"No," I said.

"Well, then," said Wickwire, "under Trail Law, a li'l matter like that thar yo' talk aboot back yonder in Missouri can't be inquired into out yhere: all you got a right to inquire into out yhere's what happens yhere. Am I correct?"

He turned to Cap', turned to the guides, especially one called Caley Jones. They both ducked their heads: Wickwire was accurate that far.

"So thar's only the thievin' charge left," he said. "Thievin's a hangin' offense, like it ought to be; but, so

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be it ain't proved against the accused, why, then, the accuser hev got to fight the party he slandered — an' I warn you I'm as good a shot as thar is 'tween yhere an' Calaveras!"

And he was correct again — for the second time, the guards nodded.

I saw the fix he'd got me into. How could I prove he'd robbed me? It was only that thing they called intuition that made me know it, intuition and arguing-out — so then he, a crack shot, would shoot me, who wasn't more than half a hand with a pistol, in what he'd call a duel: as much murder as if he'd put his knife in my back while I was sleeping!

Boy I was, but too near a man to get out of a fight on the ground of being young. Anyway, I wasn't coward enough to put that argument up. I looked at Cap' Miller, to see if I ought to say anything special, but Cap' just looked grim.

"We've lost too much time to get out'n this yhere valley tonight," he said, and he was hoppin' mad, too. "We stop yhere. Powell and Mason, pick two other men to

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guard them prisoners, one to a time and turn-and-turn about — pronto.”

So we pitched camp, and Wickwire was put under watch at one side of it, and Red Thunder and me as far as possible at the other.

There I was, in more disgrace than ever, stretched out beside the Pomo, with a sentry sitting only a few yards off, and holding a cocked rifle in his arm-crook. For a long while I wouldn't trust myself to talk, and then I thought Red Thunder was asleep — and I wondered how he could do it with so much going wrong.

So I just lay quiet till the laughter of the card-players had dwindled down, and the fires got lower and lower, and everybody but the guards rolled over and snored. There'd been a light rain; there wasn't any moon, and the stars seemed dimmer than usual. A coyote cried — kind of quavering and awful mournful.

Red Thunder's hand touched me, and I jumped.

“Boy, listen,” he whispered.

The sentry — it was Mason — said: “Shet up!”

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I said: "There's no rule against our talking."

There wasn't, so Red Thunder went on. He talked so low — right in my ear — that Mason couldn't catch a word of it, but I noticed he shifted his rifle to be a bit more handy.

Well, the Pomo said we'd have to try the thing we'd often planned to do before, but had always put off because it looked like certain death. It looked more like that than ever now, because we were unarmed, only there surely wasn't anything except death for me in the morning if we didn't try it tonight: we'd rush Mason, barehanded, attempt to stifle him before he could give an alarm, gag him, get his gun — seize our horses from the horse-guard in about the same way — and then ride off, perhaps to starve, but anyhow to freedom.

Did somebody guess we'd be desperate enough to try such a scheme — guess that and then start out to stop it? I never knew for sure. All I know is that we waited and waited, pretending to sleep again, but watching Mason, till he'd at least turn his head from us so's we could jump him — waited till it was near the time for guard-change and the night began to grow a bare mite

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less dark — till it almost seemed that the morning would overtake us. And then —

Red Thunder's moccasined foot sneaked over and touched my leg. Mason was looking away, a little drowsily, I was sure.

We got to our knees. We sprang.

We were making our half-second's rush, when somebody yelled. Not Mason — it came from over where the horses were. In a flash, everybody was awake, the whole camp — prisoners and all, except I didn't see Kaintuck' in the crowd — was running toward that frightened call.

You might think here was our chance: not a bit of it — Mason was on his feet with the rest. He wanted to see what the trouble was, and so he didn't mind our seeing, either; but he kept us covered all across the corral. We reached the horse-guard among the first. The Pomo gave one look at the animals there, and began to search the ground. He whispered something to Cap' Miller, who came on the run, and the Cap' commanded everybody to stand away.

One of the guards was saying, very loud and earnest:

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“ I warn’t asleep! I warn’t asleep! An’ I didn’t see nobody. But thar, now: lookee for yourselves at what’s happened!”

He pointed.

Some of the Lucky Lot had snatched torches from our ebbing campfires, and the whole place was alight. Four of the horses — my Eagle Feather and Red Thunder’s Johnnie among them — were limping by a hind leg. You could see red slits at the back of their hocks: somebody had somehow been interrupted while he was trying to hamstring the lot of them.

Well, the camp was awake now, anyway. Our last chance of escape was gone.



CHAPTER XV

WILD JUSTICE

GENTLEMEN!" says Cap' Miller.

He brought his thick eyebrows together, kind of glared around at us all, and loosened his long navy-revolver in its holster. His giant form towered over everybody else's. "This yhere court'll come to order!"

It wasn't much more than an hour after the alarm. I'd had to see my poor Eagle Feather and Johnnie and the other two hamstrung ponies shot — there wasn't anything else to do — and now my case was coming up for trial: a case of life or death.

Except we had sentries outside, so's nothing could happen accidental, the whole of the Lucky Lot were in

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a circle inside the circle of the white, canvas-covered wagons. The breakfast-fires had been put out, but there was a heap of damp in the heavy air, and the smell of smoke hung low: the weather was gray and dismal.

Cap' Miller sat on a box, a little inside of that ring of bearded men, some standing, some lying, careless, on the wet grass and smoking their pipes — and all weapons, except the Judge's, were piled across the corral. Red Thunder, whose face of course didn't show any more than his usual mummy-expression, stood by me, in front of Cap' and a mite to his left; opposite us, Jake Wickwire lounged, easy and smiling with his mouth and pop-eyes, but I could see a pulse was beating fast in the goitre, where his shirt hung open.

“Dan-yel Frost,” says Cap', “Yo' 're ter repeat yo' charges.”

There was a lump in my throat, big as a hen's egg: I 'most might have had Wickwire's disease. I began:

“Well, it's like this. I was coming up-river aboard the *Mississippi Belle* — ”

Anybody could interrupt at Trail trials; the whole outfit became court-officers and jury, too. So now

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Hank Turner — Kaintuck' 'd just been whispering to him — broke in:

“ Seems to me the *Mississippi Belle* ain't 'xactly a prairie-schooner. Cap', mustn't you rule out any evidence 'ceptin all such as deal with what happened in your own jurisdiction? ”

Wickwire swayed his ugly body back and forth in agreement, and smiled broader, and Miller nodded his big blond head, very solemn. “ Confine yo'-self ter the money-thievin', Frost,” says he.

I'd thought — or hoped, anyway — that they'd let me tell the whole story because it did supply the motive and made it all logical; and I didn't expect them to give judgment on the first part of it. “ You can't understand about the thieving out here,” I argued, “ unless I begin about that shooting back there.”

“ We ain't agoin' to tinker with the rules! ” Kaintuck' bellowed.

I thought maybe Cap' hesitated for just a breathing-space, but he only said:

“ Frost, these yhere men are right. Over an' above the thievin', everythin' is impertinent an' irrelevant.”

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That took pretty much out of my sails the little bit of wind there was left there. My heart dropped lower yet, and my voice must have gone with it: "Unless I start at the start —"

"Speak up!" one of the Lot called out — I think it was Buck Mason or his friend George Powell. And another fellow — likely remembering the stories he'd enjoyed when I told them 'round the night-fires — shouted: "Louder, Leatherstocking!" And some of them around him began to guffaw.

It just made me desperate and despairing. What could I do? So I blurted out:

"If you must know, my father's dead, and couldn't do it, so I was acting for my mother, carrying money to take up an option on a California claim. I had it in a money-belt. This man Wickwire and another man, named Acker, knew about the claim and wanted to stop me and get the claim for themselves. Well, Wickwire here: I'm sure he followed and robbed me!"

Put that way, it sounded awful thin, and you could tell everybody thought so. Only I felt so sure: there'd been that shot from the woods when we'd got Henderson

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ashore after the fire; and, all of a sudden, I remembered that Mormon lad they'd buried — tall and carrot-headed like me — that they couldn't account for the death of: and I knew how much I was in the way of some people's hopes. They all began to throw questions at me:

I hadn't seen any robber — how did I know it was Wickwire? If I did know it, why had I let the whole outfit be searched right after it happened? Of course I couldn't explain without telling what they wouldn't let me tell, and when I tried to say so, they yelled me down.

Cap' Miller put up a hand, palm out:

“Order in my court! We'll come back to these yhere p'int's later on — later on we'll have a reg'lar cross-examination. What we're agittin' at now's jes' the two statements o' the case. — Defendant Wickwire, let's hear yourn.”

I remember how the morning-mist was curling out of the ground. It didn't reach up to the mountains far ahead, that stood clear and bright-colored now, high above it; but it wrapped around Wickwire's goitre. His smile pulled one corner of his mouth crooked, and I hated the confidence in his whole air.

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“Yo’ honor — an’ jury,” he says, “I cal’late I gotta fight this yhere whelp arter the trial, that bein’ a matter o’ the Code, but beyond sech doin’s, I ain’t aholdin’ nothin’ again’ him, ’cause he’s jes’ a nacherl-born darn fool. Mebbie he b’lieves what he says: they tells me he’s a yarn-spinner — I reckon, in this yhere present case, his ’magination’s got the bit in her teeth an’ sort er run away with him.”

“Stick to fac’s!” snapped Cap’ Miller.

“Shorely. Well, yo’ honor, he don’ do nothin’ but make a statement: all I’ll do — jes’ now — ’s to make another. Bearin’ no personal grudge, lemme say: I never knowed nobody named Acker, Aaron or otherwise. Never seen the plaintiff befo’ I joined-up yhere las’ evenin’. Lived in Lynn, Mass., ’fore I come west and warn’t never on no Mississippi steamboat in my —”

“All references to them Missouri incidents,” says Cap’, “air ruled out.”

“All right, yo’ honor,” Wickwire said, still smiling, “an’ quite proper. Well, then, I build my stack to a complete denial an’ demand this yhere Frost submit evidence to prove his charge.”

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“That’s the stuff!” Kaintuck’ swung out in the ring. “Don’ we-all know the way Frost yarns? Mebbie he didn’ mean no harm at fust — jes’ an amusin’ red-headed liar. Now, though —”

“That’s reas’nable!” the crowd agreed. “That’s how ’twere.”

“It’s not evidence!” Cap’ shut them up. “’Less’n yo’ got some evidence, Kaintuck’, set down.”

But Kaintuck’s red lips grinned through his thick beard:

“I hev got some,” he says, “which I jes’ a minute ago recollected. Cyan’t see why I didn’t recall of it afore, but it come to me while Frost was bluffing yo’-all, an’ I mote’s well speak my piece right off, so’s to save our val’able time, ’caze it puts the plaintiff tight inside the corral. When I fust met-up with him an’ the Injun, jes’ afore jinin’ yo’-all, he was acomin’ out’n a stream-swim as naked as the day he was born. Then I watched him put on his clothes — every last stitch on ’em. Well, sir, he didn’t hev no money-belt. I say it deliberate.”

It was like he’d hit me all of a sudden in the stomach.

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Of course he'd seen the belt and somehow, the night of the robbery, must have told Wickwire — when Wickwire sneaked in.

“That's an out-and-out lie!” I screamed.

But it seemed as if I were completely surrounded by lies, one built on top of another until you couldn't see the truth at all for them. My denouncing one wasn't any use. The majority were still sore at me for raising a row that had ended in their being searched. Looked as if the trial was going to end right off — with me the loser. I could as good as see myself standing up to Wickwire's pistol.

And who do you think interfered? The Pomo!

He pushed past me till he got right in front of Cap'. He still presented that stone-idol's face of his, but he says:

“Everybody come 'long Red Thunder.”

“What?”

You ought to have heard them — and seen them jostling around him!

He didn't change any. “Some man in outfit make bad medicine — same man make all. You come 'long

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Red Thunder: Red Thunder show who hurt horses, then mebbie you find out who steal money — who help steal, anyway. Come 'long Red Thunder."

I tell you, there was a rumpus then! Kaintuck's beard almost shook while he said why should we listen to a crazy Indian, who was only trying to get us off the track so's to save himself and me? But the fellows who owned the third and fourth ponies — Wilkins and Standish, their names were — knew that they'd have to walk from now on and drag handcarts to boot, and they were righteous mad, as well as a bit scared, too, I judge. Anyhow, they allowed the hamstringing must be the work of the same person as robbed me, like Red Thunder said. Wickwire claimed the cases were separate — we'd ought to settle the theft first, he argued — but Cap' was inclined to drag in the new one, it surely being in his jurisdiction.

Three things finally brought the court — or most of them — 'round to his way of thinking: the Pomo's quiet manner, the chance to solve the latest mystery, and the feeling for fair-play that near everybody had, at heart, those days, along the Trail. We all followed Red

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Thunder to the place where the horses had been picketed the night before.

They'd been moved since, even the sound ones, and the ground was still clear. So were the footmarks of the guard and of all of us who'd run up, but you'll remember Cap' had kept us back, at Red Thunder's suggestion, and so things were plain enough for an Indian, who always has eyes at the back of his head.

Red Thunder was straight-off down on his hands and knees, peering close to the earth and sniffing like a fox-terrier. "There — see!" he'd say — "and there!"

Hoof and guards, the bootprints overlapped. Still, there was one pretty distinct trail of a different boot, now and again, and that's what he kept tracing and pointing to: a set that had gone on tiptoe.

Nobody's except the feet of a guilty person — anyway, a person who didn't have any lawful business on the spot — who had tiptoed — so there were certainly the traces of whoever'd wounded the ponies. Had to be! Everybody understood it.

"Men look," grunted Red 'Thunder. "This one, him have boot we can know when see."

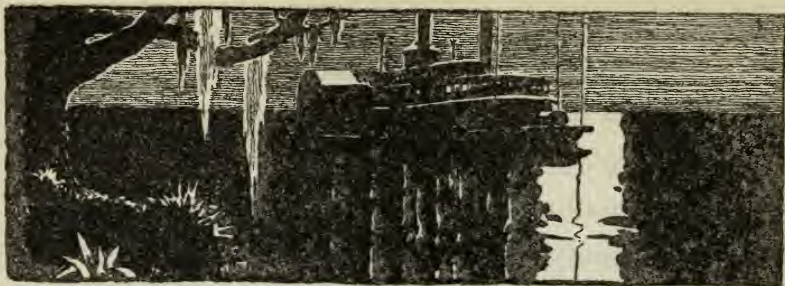
WILD JUSTICE

He pointed to four — five — six impressions on the ground where our mounts had first tramped down and then torn away the grass till there was only the mud left. There sure enough: the toe of that criminal's left boot had had a small piece nicked out of it, some time or another, shape of a triangle.

Red Thunder pulled himself upright and faced us all with that son-of-a-chief air of triumph he didn't let generally shine through any more. "Now," he said, "all men show boots. Then we know whose boot made these."

Cap' Miller clapped him on the back, and there was a faint cheer from some of the men.

"That gits us a right slant on to the case," says Miller. And he says to the others, mighty pleased: "This yhere's what I was awaitin' to hev sprung on you, boys!" He looked around at us, fair beaming. "I reckon the Injun's correct, eh? Well, then call in the whole kit an' kaboodle — horse-guards an' all: 'twon't take only a couple o' minutes. Feet fust an' baggage arterwards, we-all air agoin t'hev a li'l boot-inspection!"



CHAPTER XVI

VERDICT!

TWO or three of 'em kicked — Hank and some others. They allowed they'd had enough of this sort of thing, for one trip — and all on account of me, who'd joined-up with 'em without any written invitation, after all.

“No, boys,” says Cap’, “’tain’t fair to say it’s all on account o’ Dan. This yhere’s part on account o’ Ike Wilkins an’ Bill Standish an’ their ponies — an’ Dan’s got to take the foot-test jes’ as particular as any o’ the rest o’ us.”

“But —” pock-marked Hank objects, mostly, I judge, because he’d got the habit of objecting.

And then something that surprised me considerable

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happened. Jake Wickwire spoke up, out of his drawn-down mouth — and for once he was taking Cap's part.

“The Cap's right,” he said. “We hed all ought to try a left foot in them thar tracks, an' then each fellow show his boot-toe, to see if thar's that kind o' embroidery on it — yep, an' hev our saddle-bags an' what-not gone through, so's the man as done this cyan't be ahidin' the leather he done it in.”

Miller thanked him, brief, with a jerk of his big, blond head, as much as to say, “Greatly obleeged fo' yo' good intention, but I can manage my own company's affairs 'thout aid.” He went on to the Lot: “One by one, now, with the rest watchin'.” He kind of fondled his pistol-butt to remind them of some of the other search that they'd maybe forgotten. “An',” he says, “the galoot as hangs back an' is shy, I'll hev' my doubts on.”

So they did it — had to. Some of them made it a joke, and some were good and sullen, but all of them walked up, one after another. Each'd stick his left boot-toe over a print, and some of them looked sort of scared and looked pretty close for fear they might have a guilty foot even if they did feel fairly safe in their consciences.

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“Careful, now,” Cap’ ’d say: “don’ set it down to squash the mark — don’ injure the mould.” And all the rest bent around with their noses near in the mud.

A few shoes fitted, but they didn’t have the nick in their boot-toes, so they were just stood aside to have their packs and things searched extra-special later — out of which proceeding, I may as well tell you now, nothing developed. You’ll see why in a minute. Red Thunder hadn’t anything except moccasins, but he took his test just the same, and so did Wickwire — he was even one of the first — and Cap’ and me. Nothing — nothing at all!

“What’d I tell you?” asks Hank. “A lot o’ senseless goin’s-on jes’ to fill in time!”

Cap’ Miller’s eyebrows shot together, the way I’d come to learn meant trouble. “Everybody tried?”

“Looks almost like we was mistook, Jedge,” smiles Wickwire.

“Shet up!” says Cap’. He gave a thorough look around us, and counted. “We’re one man short,” he says — and then, his face getting a slow red: “*Whar’s that thar feller as calls hissself Kaintuck’?*”

VERDICT!

Where, indeed?

We'd all been too heated-up over this examination — and that was what he'd counted on for his last, desperate chance: too heated-up for anybody to think about anybody else. With the horse-guard called off from where the horses had been moved to — round the other side of the corral — and with the scouts and the sentries called in — Kaintuck' had just naturally held back, and, when folks were too busy to notice, taken his own pony and ridden off.

“Guilty!” they all yelled at once, one way or another — all the Lucky Lot, and Wickwire yelled it as loud as the others.

They tried to sight Kaintuck', but he'd had ample time to strike the gray-blue foothills on any one of that valley's four sides. The Lot wanted to quit everything else and find him and lynch him; but Cap' said no, we'd gain nothing by that, and we'd lost enough time. I have not mentioned much about our fears of Indians, because, as we'd got farther and farther west without meeting any except “Friendlies,” I'd thought less and less about any other kind; but Miller, under the guides' advice,

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knew a heap more than the rest of us did — and now, if he could do it without losing his control of his men or perhaps making trouble among them, he wanted to keep going.

“ We got to git on, boys,” says he.

I thought my own troubles must be about over — as far as the trial was concerned. Not much! Wickwire fair ogles me, and says he to the Cap’:

“ Thar’s one other li’l’ matter ’at’s got to be settled, an’, it bein’ an affair o’ honor with me, I got a right to demand it be settled. I demand the interrupted trial be concluded.”

I saw then what he’d been up to. When Red Thunder’d started all that about the tracks, Wickwire knew how it must come out, so he arranged Kaintuck’s escape: then, because Wickwire’d been properly loud for examining the boots, nobody’d think to connect him with Kaintuck’. The fellow left behind could go on and settle my hash — and here he was, hell-bent on settling it! I saw that; but where was the good of saying so? I’d learned enough now not to say things in the future about anybody unless you’ve got proof to back them:

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it looked as if I was going to learn some more things, too.

Cap' kind of blinks at Wickwire with his bright blue eyes.

“ Why,” he says, “ this yhere Kaintuck' 's runned off. Thar ain't no doubt, from that, but what 'twas him hamstrung them poor beasts. Wherefor he done it, I cyaan't figure out nohow; but it's a tarnation safe bet, ef he was mean 'nough to do that, he was mean 'nough to do t'other.”

The Lucky Lot all agreed to that, pretty loud, as was their way; but Wickwire wouldn't have it that way. He said it was a safe bet, and himself he was dead sure of it; only he'd been brought up for trial by a regulation Trail-court, and his honor demanded a Trail-court's regulation verdict.

“ Yo'-all searched that thar Kaintuck', time o' the alleged robbery,” says Wickwire, “ an' didn't find nothin' on him er his belongin's. Course, I'd say, surmisin' — an' most men o' sense would surmise likewise, in the light o' present events — he must 'a' cached the loot that night, 'fore the theft was discovered — jes' as I'd say his plan

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this time was to hamstring all them ho'ses so's yo'-all couldn't kitch him up when he started back those hundreds o' miles to dig up his ill-got gains. But that thar ain't the p'int: the p'int is, I been accused, an' I hev a claim to a verdic'!"

It was just the kind of honest-sounding speech to fetch that crowd: a man asking to be put in jeopardy of his life a second time for the sake of squaring his record. And it did exactly what he evidently wanted it to do. They made a hero out of Wickwire straight-off, and began praising the shiny halo of innocence they all thought they could see peeking out over his wide-brimmed hat. They cheered as hard as ever they could.

Cap' gave me an eye I couldn't understand, but full of some sort of meaning.

"All right," he told them. "We'll jes' go in session as a court again, so be's we've ever gone out o' one." He looked them over. "Gentlemen, yo'-all'll retire an' consider yo' verdic'."

They laughed.

Someone sang out: "We don't hev to consider it no mo', Mr. Jedge."

VERDICT!

“Ef they’re all ready with it — ” Wickwire began to smile.

But Cap’ shook his blond head.

“No,” says he, “you, yo’self, Mr. Wickwire, havin’ showed how tender yo’ air about yo’ honor, wouldn’t want to think arterwards how yo’ acquittal might hev been the result o’ jes’ momentary enthusiasm. Come along this way, everybody; we’ll move the court back to where it started legal proceedin’s.”

He walked back to the middle of the wagon-ring, taking strides a yard-and-a-half long, and the fellows followed pell-mell after him. When he got in front of the box he’d been sitting on earlier, he stopped short. Then he says to the crowd in that sharp way he could all of a sudden drop into when he wanted:

“Go on an’ consider — git!”

They trailed off, maybe twenty yards, protesting it was all too much red-tape business. Wickwire, however, just to show how careless he was, lit a pipe and began to walk slowly up and down; Red Thunder stood still, watching him. Cap’ pulled me over to him.

“I don’ somehow like the looks o’ this,” he whispered.

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“ Somethin’ irreg’lar. That’s fo’ why I tried to break off the trial ’th’out a verdict.”

His voice had a kind of funny tenseness in it. I said:

“ Why, Cap’, what — ”

“ Pst!” he warned. “ They’re a-pilin’ back. O’ course, their minds was all made up, an’ they’d only take a second, jes’ fo’ the rules’ sake. Stand close to me — *close*, I tell you!”

I did it, and at that moment Wickwire saw them coming, too, and joined us.

The Lucky Lot — everybody was on that jury, you know, except the judge and the parties to a suit, out there in those days — walked toward us, awkward, and with the what-you-might-call shamle of men that feel they are doing something a long sight more dignified than it needs to be. About a yard from Cap’, Wickwire and me — and Red Thunder, who stood behind Wickwire — the front one of them stopped, with the others all close behind. One of the back fellows sings out:

“ We’re ready!”

Cap’ glowered at them:

“ Ef we’re agoin’ to be reg’lar, let’s be reg’lar right.

VERDICT!

Yo' 'll kindly wait an' not talk tell yo' 're talked to." He folded his arms, looking tarnation judicial. "Gentlemen o' the jury," he asks, "hev yo'-all agreed on yo' verdic'?"

"You-bet-you, Cap'!" George Powell called.

"Order in this yhere court!" says Cap'. "Ain't yo-all ever goin' to git no knowledge o' how sich things as this yhere had ought to be done? Nobody 'ceptin' yo' foreman's got leave to chip in now. Didn't yo'-all elect no foreman?"

They started to laugh again and shove somebody forward — somebody that kept saying:

"Aw, stop it, you jack-ass galoots!"

But they pushed him clear out from among them as if they thought it a great joke: Wilkins.

"Stand up like a man," Cap' barked at him.

Ike was a sawed-off runt of a fellow, with watery eyes and a fumbly way of carrying himself. He started out:

"Cap' — I mean Jedge —"

"Take yo' hat off!" Cap' bellowed at him. "Ain't yo' got no respec' fo' the court?"

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I know now why Miller was behaving like this: he was trying to frighten them all for future reference — for reference in the mighty-soon-oncoming future that he could see couldn't be delayed very long. But I couldn't make the thing out exactly, and the others couldn't make it out at all. 'Specially Ike, who wasn't the sort to get head or tail of any mystery. It just troubled him, and he jerked his hat off with a hand so scared that it near dropped what it had grabbed hold of.

“ Air you duly appointed foreman o' this yhere jury? ” asked Cap'.

“ Sure I be, Jedge — I mean, yo' honor,” Ike kind of stumbled. “ I didn't want ter be — honest, I didn't — but there ain't no use pickin' on me for it. Mason, he says, you see, seein' as how my pony was one o' them as was — as was — ”

“ Never mind 'seein'-how's' ! ” Cap' rapped out. “ The question befo' the court is, hev yo'-all agreed on a verdic', er hev'n't yo' ? ”

Ike looked at the fellows behind him for some verbal support.

“ No, ” says Miller, looking as if he could lick every-

VERDICT!

body and'd like to do it: "ef yo' 're the foreman, it's you as hev got to answer. Plain an' straight now."

So Ike says:

"'Course, we're agreed, Ca — Jed — I mean, Yo' Honor. Else why'd we come back?"

"Never mind why — you might 'a' disagreed. Juries oftimes disagree. Well, then, how find yo'-all the prisoner — meanin' this time this yhere Wickwire: guilty er not guilty?"

Here was something at last that Wilkins could say easy, and he blew out his chest to it. He up with his chin and fair howled:

"Not guilty!"

"Silence!" ordered Cap' Miller before any of the others could let themselves loose in the cheer that was actually bursting through their lips. But even he didn't foresee just what would happen.

The verdict, of course, was what we'd all been sure of; but what hardly any had expected — seeing it looked to most of us Kaintuck' was so plumb guilty that my charges against Wickwire couldn't stand and I'd have to take them back — what hardly any expected was

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what happened next. The man with the goitre kept his word.

He turned around to me, and even to the others it must have been sort of dramatic. That pulse in the thing on his throat was hammering. His pulled-around mouth twitched, and it looked to me, standing there, as if the red veins in his popping eyeballs were going to break through and run over. Suddenly he got his fingers into my shirt-collar — he pointed across the corral to where all the weapons were piled.

“An’ now, Dan Frost,” he says, “you got to fight me!”



CHAPTER XVII

THE CODE OF HONOR

EVERYBODY else was knocked silly — except Cap', I guess, who'd certainly been expecting something, and may be Red Thunder. And except me, too. I've said they were simple souls, the Lucky Lot.

Those last few minutes, having guessed the drift of things a little, I'd sort of stoked-up my fires. I was tall and tough, however lanky, but of course in a pistol-duel, Wickwire'd have everything his own way. That ought've considerable scared me? Well, hope to die, it somehow didn't. Instead of scaring me, the low-down one-sidedness of his calculated game just made me mad clean through.

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I'm not excusing what I did. Of all the crazy ways of trying to settle a difference and not succeeding, I reckon a duel's the craziest— doesn't prove anything, whichever way it ends, and, these days, nobody but a child or a loony man'd suggest it. Still, back in '49, half the men that crossed the plains, for all their bravery and pluck, had a lot of the child in them, like I've said, and most of the other half were harebrained harum-scarums, or else lost a fair amount of their commonsense a week out from civilization. I guess I wasn't any better than the rest.

I tore myself out of his grip, but I faced him.

“ All right,” said I, “ I'll fight you!”

It must have been a queer sort of picture. We'd taken an hour or more to what had happened, and the sun had cleared away the cloudiness. The sky was blue; over the wagon-tops, those gray foothills backed by the ranges began to sparkle silver, and the canvas of the Conestogas was like white fire. Peaceful, that was; but here, in the middle of it, with a ring of slouch-hatted, tobacco-chewing, unshaved pioneers around us, Dan Frost — his fists right and his cheeks redder, through

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his freckles even, than his topknot — stood up to pop-eyed Wickwire, who'd "Murder" written all over his dry skin and the tight-pulled muscles of his ugly face.

"Yo' 're plumb loco!" says Cap.'

That loosened the tongues of the whole Lucky Lot, who'd got thoroughly tongue-tied with the legal stuff. It'd been all right for Wickwire to threaten a duel before the trial, and they were on his side then, and still more on it when the trial-evidence went the way it did, and they acquitted him. But men in the wilderness change sudden, and it turned out now that nobody'd really taken his fight-talk serious — just wanted justice pronounced, so to speak — or, anyway, it looked different when there might be only a minute before he turned it into something actual. Besides, they might have been down on me since the robbery till now, but the way I'd answered back to Wickwire sort of won them. They all — even Hank Turner and chicken-livered Ike — began to remember this was a boy, without any pistol-skill to speak of, picked on by a man that anybody could see had no end of experience.

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Everybody said it. They made it a chorus: said they wouldn't allow a fight that wasn't fair.

But Wickwire was a determined fellow. His smile only got uglier. He called one of the two professional guides we had left — that leather-skinned Caley Jones: he was the one had been the Lot's authority on Trail-law from the day they started.

“Is this yhere my right,” asks Wickwire, sticking out his puffy face, “er ain't it?”

Caley cocked his hat and scratched his head. “Wal, the rule shore seems to be the way you hev it; on the other hand, Frost, yhere, he's only —”

“I don't care how young I am!” I said, and I didn't.

“Yo' hear him?” says Wickwire. “He don' want ter hide a-hint his years 's if they was his ma's aprin-strings — I give him credit fo' that. An' as fer you, Caley Jones” — Wickwire'd got down everyone's name awful slick — “Yo'-all know the Law o' the Trail don' draw no distinctions on age. When an all-alone boy of his own free will j'ines an outfit made up o' men fer men, he counts himself a man an's got to be so counted. Ain't that the right interperation o' it, Caley?”

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“Yo’ put it strong, Wickwire.”

“But ain’t it so?”

Jones unwound the forty-foot-long lariat of braided raw-hide he wore around his waist and began twirling the noose of it, nervous. “Yes, I reckon that applies — so be the boy ain’t no idjit er weaklin’.”

“Yo’-all know this yhere one’s brains is normal. An’ a weaklin’? His years don’ make no dif’rence nohow. Look at the long-legged, red-shingled galoot — bigger’n me by a haid!”

“Oh — ” I started, still mighty angry.

But I broke off quick, for Cap’ was pinching my arm so it was ’most more’n I could do to keep from fainting.

“I b’lieve yo’ air an idjit!” he whispered. “Shet up an’ hold yo’ peace!” Then he says out loud to Wickwire: “Yo’ gotta rec’lect Dan-yel Frost, as a boy, but not makin’ that his excuse, didn’ know nothin’ about the law.”

“Ignorance o’ the law’s nary an excuse,” Wickwire says. “Not nowhere it ain’t.”

“Well, anyways,” the Cap’ kept it up, “you tol’ us yo’re a crack shot, an’ this yhere boy — ”

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“Listen to me.” Wickwire held up a long trigger-finger and goggled around at all of us. “I know my rights, an’ yhere’s my las’ word about ’em — ’fore I acts. This boy Frost — who’s full man’s size in brain an’ body — he had a smart chance to withdraw his charge smack arter he made it, an’ he refused to withdraw it, so now he’s gotta face the music. But I’ll play fair — I won’t have no man sayin’ otherwise: I’ll give my opponent two shots to my one, an’ I’ll promise jes’ to wing him er leg him — that bein’ o’ course ef he don’t kill me fust.” He sunk his chin on his goitre and regarded them vicious. “An’ that’s the most I’ll go fo’ any o’ the hull b’ilin’ o’ you!”

Only wing me! I didn’t feel like pinning my faith to that: the best shots can have accidents. And the rest of the crowd weren’t satisfied, either — only on different grounds.

It was one of the queerest things in those queer days, the way men, a lot of them old law-breakers and all of them more or less unrestrained-like, might grumble at Trail-law; but wouldn’t, except the worst lots, dream of breaking it. This outfit was with me just then, and yet

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not one of them proposed going against the rough-and-ready rules their own sort had bit by bit built up for the trans-continental journey. Now they only looked at one another and shook their heads.

In a moment's stillness, Red Thunder grunted. "Me take boy place," he said.

My heart rose to my throat at his generosity, and then one or two of the Lucky Lot followed it with the same offer, right off. But Wickwire wouldn't have it — I wouldn't have had it, either. He said the law didn't provide for substitutes that hadn't any natural claim, or any legal claim, to substituting themselves. And I got free enough from Cap's pinching to call out:

"I can take care of myself, if I've got to! And — thanks lots — but I don't want anybody to risk his life for me!"

It seemed it was a choked road. Then, with a long stretch, the Cap' hauled me back to beside him.

He stuck his bristly blond-whiskered face close to mine. He had hold of both my shoulders, and his two eyebrows were like a single big one.

"Ef yo'-all let out another yip," he says, "I'll — I'll

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put you acrost my knee an' — an' spank you befo' the hull comp'ny, s'help me!"

I knew he could. I knew he would! He'd shame me. And so he did do something Wickwire couldn't do: he made me afraid.

"All right," I grumbled.

"Will yo' hold yo' crazy tongue while I'm talkin'?"

"Yep."

He dropped me — then he wheeled around to Wickwire and Caley.

"Now," says the Cap', at his top height, "what about a boy as hev got a father along o' him? Ain't that father 'sponsible fo' him?"

Wickwire's upper teeth dug into his under lip. "Thar ain't no question o' a pappy yhere."

"But answer me fair an' square: ain't the father 'sponsible ef he do be yhere?" Miller's eyes nearly sparkled fires, and he looked as fierce as I'd ever seen him. "You answer, Caley."

"Why, shore," says the guide, evidently puzzled, "ef thar be a pap —"

"Well, then," concludes Cap', "this yhere's a court —"

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an' it's a court made up by all you fellers' own votes, with me fo' jedge. Dan-yel Frost, yhere, 's inside o' my jurisdiction, ain't he, an' we're all agreed he ain't got no father livin'. Any jedge kin allow any man to adopt a son fixed like Frost is. Well, fellers, I yhereby apply to myself fo' leave to adopt Dan-yel Frost as my son — an' I yhereby grant to myself my petition!"



CHAPTER XVIII

THE WAR-WHOOP

WITH one shove, Cap' pushed me back of him; with the other arm, daring them all, out came his navy-gun.

The crowd threw its hats in the air and shouted wild approval while they jumped on them as they fell down. Wickwire turned a dirty white under his tan.

“ I never heerd tell o' no sich preceedin' on the Trail,” he fair snarled.

It was Miller's turn to smile, and his big face was wreathed with it: “ An' novelty's always welcome, eh? I'm right shore yo' 'll be glad to find an excuse fo' the boy an' a chance to hev a man to fight!”

Still, you had to admit that Wickwire was game. He

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saw he'd lost his influence with the Lot — for the time — but, covered as he was — and Sure-Shot Miller holding his gun so's the other couldn't duck out of range, — Wickwire made a dash through the crowd. He tumbled a couple of them, head over tincup. He was running, bent low, for where we'd stacked our guns and pistols.

“Don't shoot him in the back!” pock-marked Turner pleaded.

“'Twouldn't be fair, Cap'!” warns Mason, picking himself up.

“Caley,” Cap' bellowed, “git him!”

They all jumped aside, leaving a clear avenue that opened out along Wickwire's course. Jones must have coiled his *reata* a good minute before.

One instant there was a big, whizzing noise; the next, there weren't but two sounds: the swift pad of the goitre-man's boots on the turf — and the hiss of that lasso as its open noose swooped, like an eagle, after him.

He didn't hear it. He was too set on getting a gun even to dodge the shot he must have expected: the noose went a lot quicker than him. It opened over his head — dropped below his shoulders, graceful but sure.

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Caley Jones planted his right heel in the ground — yanked, and down crashed Wickwire. With Mason helping, the guide hauled him back kicking and squealing as if he'd been no more than a troublesome calf.

“Quit yer haulin’!” he howled. “Ef yo’ ’ll only let me be, I’ll walk in!”

Any outfit as rough as ours thinks such things are funny, no matter how much they may have liked, a while before, the fellow they happen to; so the Lucky Lot near burst its sides with laughing. Under cover of that, Cap’ says to me, private:

“They’re ag’in him now, but one o’ these days soon they’ll be fer him ag’in. He knows what he’s about, an’ he’s a born trouble-stirrer with a suave tongue to lead these simple lads any which-way. They’re tired an’ nervous with the trip, an’ these three weeks they’ve all wanted to start a mutiny — more’n half on ’em — which is the why I hed to treat you harsh, ’caze ’twere dangerous, fo’ you not to. Well, here’s the man fo’ their money — an’ whatever his game may be, he don’t fancy me.”

That’s what Cap’ said, and the words went in only one

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ear to be remembered later, because I was too busy watching Wickwire pulled in sidewise, to pay undivided attention. He was covered with mud when he reached us and staggered to his feet.

“What sort o’ treatment’s this yhere?” he yammered in his strangled voice, digging the dirt out of his bulging eyes, and with his goitre all puffed and palpitating. “Yo’ drew a bead on a unarmed man, an’ when he tried to git a gun, yo’ had him lassoed. Ef yo’ ’re so fond o’ yo’ newly ’dopted son, I won’t tetch the brat — but jes’ gimme a firearm an’ let me hev a stand-up, man-to-man fight with you!”

He had a mite of logic on his side, and, if you please, this brought a lot of that wobbly crowd ’round to him! Some of the very fellows that’d been laughing at his tumble said he was made of the right stuff, after all, and ran to fetch him a pistol; some more warned him what a finger for the trigger Sure-Shot had, but the majority of the Lot sang out:

“Aw, ’nough’s enough! He’s got all he needed, Cap’ — an’ ef it warn’t fair fo’ him to fight the boy, what’d it be fo’ yo’-all to fight Wickwire?”

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Caley Jones unloosed the lariat, and he and the other guide said:

“Thet’s so — an’ we’ve done lost a power o’ time here — half the hull morning’s wasted. We had oughter be gittin’ out’n this hole.”

I watched Cap’s face. It was plain what he was thinking. If he just now tried to force a row with Wickwire, like Wickwire’d tried to force one with me, there was no telling what trouble it’d precipitate: that lop-sided Lucky Lot was already swinging back to the other side; and yet a clean fight was the only way of putting a final end of the matter. Miller made the best of a bad job — he shoved his gun back in its holster, and, says he:

“The guides’ word is what we got to stand by — they all know the route. — Wickwire, nobody kin call either one o’ us a coward: ef yo’ll withdraw yo’ demand fo’ a fight, I’ll withdraw mine.”

It was mighty squarely put. The crowd saw it was: Wickwire couldn’t do anything except agree.

“Then here we go to strike camp,” said Cap’ — and he gave the order.

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Seemed to me his words were still hanging on the air when the thing that the guides had been afraid of for so long happened. The men whose turn it was, that day to be our advance-guard tore out of the corral to saddle their horses: they were no sooner outside the ring than we heard them shout — and it was the kind of a shout that sent us piling after them.

There they were, half of them with their saddles and bridles still in their arms; but the other half had dropped what they held. They were pointing across that valley, eastward, and yelling while they did it:

“Look! — Looky thar!”

The ground rolled away pretty level for about a mile — maybe more — but then it began to really roll. A line of easy ridges rose up, gently, and climbed to the start of the foothills. Well, just walking his horse up the crest of the nearest ridge, but still as plain as the weathercock on the Presbyterian church-steeple in Heliopolis, was the figure of an Indian.

We looked at him — and then at one another. For half a second, nobody spoke. Then shaved-off Ike Wilkins gave a girlish sort of scared giggle.

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“ P’raps — p’raps it’s only the — the tail-end of some huntin’-party.”

That brave on horseback topped the crest. As he reached it, he turned around in his seat. The sunlight made him look to me like some black statue sharp outlined against the farther distance: a slim body, naked to the waist — a strip of feathers on his head — in one hand a white man’s rifle.

Caley’s partner — I forget his name, but it don’t matter: the other guide, I mean — craned his neck and wrinkled his forehead, his eyes half shut in the strain of looking. Then he snorted:

“ Huntin’-party! ’Twon’t be long ’fore yo’ find out what kind o’ game that Injun an’ them as must be with him air huntin’. My sight’s better’n yourn, an’ I knows the signs — Don’t I still carry a Sioux arrer-head in my thigh which I can’t pick out nohow?”

Cap’ laid hold of him and shook him.

“ Tell us!” he ordered. “ Tell us! Do yo’ think this yhere’s a time fo’ gas? What do yo’ see?”

We all stood still in front of our train, there under the blazing sun, with the sparkling valley about us and

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the sparkling hills and mountains around — stood still and silent while Caley's partner — Caley himself doing the same beside him — put a brown palm above his eyes and looked harder than ever eastwards. He must have had the vision-power of a hawk, for he said, slow and solemn:

“ Four turkey-feathers — so o' course their shafts' is painted red. I don't know how they got down this a-way, but I'll eat my hat if it ain't a war-party of Arapahoes as is acrost thar! ”

To've come all this way safe from dangers like that, and then to've stood still and squabble among ourselves — in a place that was a fair trap — till the red men found us there! It didn't seem like it was possible.

It was, though — it was true. Caley says, biting his words:

“ That's right. Cap', git yo' men back to the wagons. We got ter git ready fo' a — ”

The Indian had reined in. We were 'way out of range there, and he couldn't do any harm. But he could show us that he knew we saw him — that he didn't care

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— that he was a scout sent to reconnoitre us, report to a main force and bring it up for action. He could show us that, and he did: he put his rifle to his shoulder and sent a bullet toward us.

“Barricade!” yelled Cap’ Miller. He led the way, on the run, back to our corral. “Powell — Wilkins, fetch in the horses! — Mason, git help with the cattle.” He was issuing orders as he went — and as we tumbled along beside or behind him. “Everybody else turn in and fill up the wagon-wheels!”

You can guess we went mighty fast and mighty noisy; but there came after us a noise that beat through the clatter of our feet and the shouts of our panic. It made me turn my head.

Nothing to see — and yet everything that’s worst to fear! Somewhere, hidden between the lower ridges and the silvery blue-and-gray foothills, an enemy had been waiting for exactly the signal of that red scout’s gun. The scout himself had dropped over the crest and out of sight, now; but another thing — that noise — rose up. It rose up, as if it came from nowhere and everywhere at once — plain terrible, out of this emptiness and per-

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meating it. Only a sound it was, but the worst I ever heard.

It was high-pitched and throbbing: a blood-tingling, heart-stopping cry — or, rather, a series of cries broken without being stopped. It made the air dance a death-dance. It got inside your brain and beat it the way an egg-beater beats an egg.

It was an Indian war-whoop.



CHAPTER XIX

INSIDE THE FLYING CIRCLE

HOW long would we have? —
Five minutes? —
Twenty? —

In those days, everybody knew that the red savages always — maybe out of sheer deviltry, maybe to breed fright — gave ample warnings before a daytime attack. How long would they give us to get ready?

We hadn't as yet seen but that one scout: we, numbering forty-seven, couldn't guess whether there were fifty Indians against us, or a hundred. Still, we were lucky in one way: we had the advantage of Caley Jones' experience, and his partner's, and Cap' Miller's, too — in the Florida wars. Weeks and weeks before I joined-up

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with the Lucky Lot, those fellows had drilled their men in exactly what they'd have to do if any such thing happened as was going to happen now.

Nobody thought any more about the trouble we'd been having among ourselves — everybody got to work and sweated over it, and the first thing I knew a squad raced in with the horses and picketed them at the centre of the corral, while another squad went out after the oxen to drive them in. If the red-men had held off a half-hour more, they'd have found us strung out in a marching line that wouldn't have had any chance to form a defense before they came at us; but, likely, they'd got tired waiting, or had guessed we were going to stop here on account of sickness or something. Anyway, our wagons were still in that circle without our having to make it over again.

We began to toss stuff underneath 'em — and to fill in all the wheels that didn't have men assigned 'em, to shoot through — so's we could have better barricades. Baggage, bedding: half of us threw out everything and the other half stacked it up; but folks who were going to be miners were like poor old Hanby Henderson — they "travelled light," and we didn't have near enough.

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“Get yo’ minin’-tools an’ dig!” Cap’ commanded.

A second later, picks and spades were flashing, and the dirt flew, starting entrenchments around the inside of the ring, with the dug-out earth banking under the wagons. Miller’s face was like a hunter’s moon while he slashed around among us and gave orders what to do as soon as the attack began.

He’d sent scouts to all four sides, because you couldn’t tell but what the Indians would make a circuit under cover of the ridge and attack us from an unexpected quarter — an old trick of theirs, Caley said. Then, while the digging went on fair furious, Miller posted the best shots here and there, all the way ’round the enclosure, and had them standing there ready with their rifles resting on wheel-spokes.

“Solder yo’ eyes to that thar horizon,” he told those fellows. “Solder ’em! Don’ depend on the scouts — the best man kin’t see everythin’. Sing out ef yo’ notice any queer sight — but no matter what happens, hold yo’ fire, everybody present, tell the red-skins get inside o’ easy range!”

Fifteen minutes — it must have been — and along

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came the gang that had gone out for our oxen. The beasts moved slow, and their drivers swore. Meantime, Cap' was reminding each digger of where his post would be when the time came for him to drop his tools and take up his shooting-iron.

I was working with a spade beside Buck Mason, Red Thunder doing the same to the right of me, when Miller caught sight of me. I'd got my knife and pistol and put 'em in my belt; my gun was lying beside me.

"You, Dan-yel," says Cap' — "Yo' 're quick an' young. When they rush us, yo' 're to stand behind Buck at this yhere wheel an' let him work yo' rifle an' hisn, you reloadin' fo' him."

I near dropped my spade. "Aren't you going to let me fight?" I asked.

But he wouldn't give me any satisfaction. "Git on away!" he said, and hurried on himself, back and forth — back and forth — over the corral. Away off somewhere a drum throbbed — an Indian drum.

Then Wickwire ran by on some errand for the Cap'. Jake's goitre was swollen up like a balloon, and it so

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happened that Red Thunder's pick came back just then and all but dropped its rear point through Wickwire's skull. I never was told whether it was accident or not; but it came nigh to being a serious one for Jake Wickwire, anyhow. He just jumped aside so's the steel missed him by a hair.

"Yo' dirty, low-down, murderin' red-skin!" he howled. He did it with the greatest lot of downright blasphemy I'd ever listened to, as if all the desperate life he'd led was belched out in his words. "What are yo' adoin' yhere, nohow? I'll bet them-yonder's friends o' yourn that's comin' fer ter git us, yo' hound — an' that yo' somehow brung 'em yhere."

Out flew his pistol. I did drop my spade at that and, while Red Thunder was facing Wickwire without a word or a motion, I fastened hard on to his right wrist. There'd have been a brisk little personal fight before the big one, only Cap' spied us from across the corral and dashed over to us.

"Stop that thar!" he roared, and had Wickwire by his thick throat and me by an arm.

"This yhere Injun tried ter brain me with his pick!"

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Jake spluttered. "An' I b'lieve he's in cahoots with that thar war-party out thar!"

"Wickwire walked right into the pick," I said, which was true, though maybe Red Thunder'd been careful not to see him — "and this Indian's no Arapahoe: I told you long ago he's pure Pomo from California."

"'Course he is," said Miller. "No ructions now! An' he's not goin' to be armed nohow: he's goin' to reload fo' George Powell yhere — Powell bein' one o' our crack-shots." Cap' gave Jake a giant-push that 'most toppled him. "Get on aboot yo' business!"

If ever I saw malice before in Wickwire's drawn-down face, I saw it shining out against Red Thunder then, and I said to myself should we come through alive from this Indian attack, there'd sooner or later be a hard day somewhere ahead for Red Thunder anyhow. And I could read the non-expression of the Pomo well enough by now to be sure he saw it, too.

That was all I did see of the man with the goitre for the time being, for the attack was coming! Not half enough dirt had been thrown up when a call sounded from the ridges that I know now was an Indian signal

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given on a whistle of eagle-bone. The war-whoop followed that — ripped across the valley again, and not from the east: from pretty well over to the south.

This was the direction the wagon's flank lay along where I was working. I ducked between the wheels and looked out. One of our scouts was riding in from there, his horse's feet, 'fore and 'hind, looking as if they met under his belly. First off, I couldn't make out anything else except, coming toward us, too — but away off — a cloud of dust that wasn't any he'd raised.

First off — then something crossed the green ridge that lay back of him and spread out and rushed toward us, lengthening east and west as it advanced. Full gallop — and, right away, full view: mounted savages — feathered heads — coup-sticks flying red and yellow trimmings — buffalo-hide shields in front of their chest — lances — horn war-bows and war-clubs — and, some of them, rifles.

I got back into the corral quicker, even, than I'd left it. That scout landed there at the same second. Our other scouts were tumbling in. Digging was ended —

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every man was at his post, with his rifle, when another war-whoop sounded — from the north.

Another here — another there. What I'd seen to the south, other fellows saw east and west. The Arapahoes were going to attack from all sides. The ground fair shivered with the noise of their horses when the four parties joined and began galloping 'round and 'round our little camp, making a dizzy, flying circle that got narrower and narrower — nearer and nearer — every twist.

Cap's voice vaulted the din. "Mind yo'-all hold yo' fire tell they're inside easy range!"

Buck Mason didn't lift his head from his rifle-butt; he kept looking between the wheel-spokes. But he called out:

"More'n a hundred, anyways you count 'em!"

Over his shoulder I leaned and saw them again — lots nearer now — a swirl going so fast it was like looking at a mill-race: half-naked bodies of Indians on white and black and pinto ponies that flew as if they were the wind in a wind-storm and that the riders rode as if nothing could ever separate them. Their faces were streaked

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with paints; to their waists, their skin was all bright with grease or oil; the beads on the quivers hanging from their shoulders shunted the sun into my eyes, and some of them — I couldn't quite make that out — seemed like they were carrying torches.

“Now!” I heard Cap' Miller from somewhere back of me. “Let 'em have it!”

All around the corral, we opened fire. Powell shot at my right and handed back his rifle to Red Thunder. Buck Mason shot in front of me and reached for my gun. Before I reloaded, I took one more look: I saw a horse and rider in the grass; but I saw the streaming circle jump them or trample them down, and swing on — all the while converging.

The firing became general on our side, and some of the enemy replied — though they took an easy, nerve-racking time about it — with a few of their rifles. The bullets tore through the wagons — whistled past our heads — splintered wheel-spokes and sent the soft dirt flying: every time Buck fired, I felt as if the explosion went off inside my own red head.

Then I heard something else that was new. It was the

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twang of bows — the hiss of arrows — the z-zup of them when they struck.

While I was standing to my work, one went through both the sheets of canvas on the wagon in front of me. I felt the air-rush alongside my cheek, turned around and saw that arrow'd hit the box Cap' had sat on when he presided as judge — the head must have been a good twelve inches inside, for only the feathered tip was showing!

This was the first sort, but some were sent high and dropped in the corral's centre, to stampede the horses — began to look as if they'd do it, too; the poor beasts were whimpering and pawing and jerking at their ropes — and still others, which explained the torches I'd seen, were on fire and directed into the wagons: smoke was coming out of a couple of our Conestogas, a little to my left.

I saw three or four of the Lucky Lot lying dead or wounded and writhing in the dry grass at their post, and when I got my eyes over Buck's shoulder again, things looked worse for us, outside. The circle had come as close as it just then meant to — a matter of a

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hundred yards or so — and the Indians were hanging over the off-flanks of their ponies, by one leg flung across-saddle: they were shooting from under the necks of their mounts, so's our fellows — good marksmen and working steady — hadn't anything except a racing foot here and a racing face there to aim at. We had to try for the animals, mostly, and then give a second shot to the rider, if he escaped alive — and those tactics furnished the enemy with another advantage: hanging so, they could fire all the better between the wheels of our prairie schooners.

“Get 'em!” I yelled to Buck. I was plumb crazy.

Well, it was enough to make anybody loco: that raging circle of tossed-up hoofs and painted cheeks, the spit of arrows and the flash of rifles darting out of it, and our own guns replying. Noise — smoke — dust. Arrows flew, bullets whizzed direct, or struck something that deflected them and then screamed the way only a ricocheted bullet can. Ponies tumbled — six — a dozen — maybe twenty. Sometimes they rolled over on top of their riders, who lay quiet afterwards; sometimes an Indian would jump or fall clear and get part-way up,

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to fire into the corral before a white man's bullet fetched him.

One brave ran right for the partly open space between our wagon and its western neighbor — George Powell's aim sent that fellow back to his knees. I tried to count how many Arapahoes were down, here in front of us, and then figure how many were likely done-for all around the circle; but I couldn't make it — and no matter how many there were, we were away outnumbered.

“Keep up yo' fire — keep up yo' fire!” I heard, through the mist of smoke and racket, Cap' Miller bel-
lowing.

Looking back again, I saw he'd taken some shot man's place and was pumping lead like the rest. And I saw more: those two of our wagons that had been smoking were in full blaze now. I knew that Cap' didn't dare spare any marksmen to fight the flames — in about a minute, our wall would have a big gap in it.

I was handing back a rifle — mine or his, I don't rightly remember which — to Buck. I yelled:

“Let me shoot — let me just try the next one, will you?”

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“No,” he said, over his shoulder and reaching backward for the gun. “We can’t waste —”

Then: “Zup!”

He made a noise himself — something between a snarl and a gasp. He let go his gun — clawed at his breast. There was an arrow stuck into it, deep.

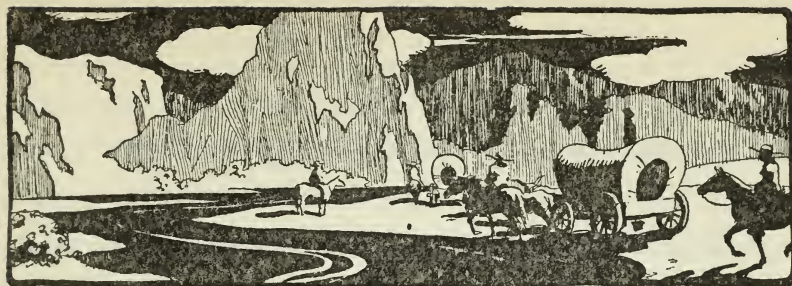
He fell into my arms. I threw down the other rifle and tried to pull that arrow out — and couldn’t. I looked at him: he was dead.

I’d got my wish — but in a way that made me sick. I scooped up one of the dropped guns and took Buck’s place at the wheel.

Then I saw there was another change. A big share of the Indians were massing out there to the left and pulling their ponies face toward us. They were going to charge into the corral across the smoking ruins of those two wagons they’d succeeded in burning down.

Going to? — They were doing it!

While I howled a warning to Cap’ — and pointed — they began their short, hard gallop. A column of them, five or more across and I don’t know how deep — rode, yelling and shooting, at that gap in our defenses.



CHAPTER XX

AT THE LAST GASP

RED THUNDER — grabbing a gun — ahead of me, and George Powell limping behind, I tore for the spot where the Arapahoes were bursting through. Somebody — I guess it was the Pomo — must have seen what they planned and given an alarm before I did: anyhow, while a few of our men stuck to their posts, to keep up fire against such Indians as still made the circle, all the rest of us were making toward that space in the corral.

And there came the enemy. Bronze-bright bodies, war-paint gleaming, lances and rifles — no bows now, not even buffalo-bows — knives and tomahawks ready for close-quarters — shots and shouts and some sort of

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chant that made a kind of under-current to it all. And our fellows on foot against that savage cavalry!

Cap' had just time to order us sharply into three lines on each of three sides of a square around the ash-piles, and we had just time to take this formation, a front line lying flat, the second one kneeling, and the one behind that standing up. It formed a cup that the Arapahoes would have to ride into, but they oughtn't to have much trouble breaking — and I was put in the rear line on the right flank.

“Shoot when their front rank's half-way in!” Miller commanded — there was blood on his face from a scalp-wound. “And then club your rifles!”

Then they were here.

“Bang!” went our guns — all pretty much together.

The next thing was just a whirlpool of rearing ponies, battering hoofs and hand-to-hand tussling. No order — no tactics — every man for himself, and God help the weak ones.

I saw Wickwire swinging his rifle in a ring of dismounted Indians — a villain, but no coward. I had a glimpse of little Ike Wilkins, awkward to the last, go-

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ing down under a war-mace. George Powell tottered. Standish fell in front of me with a lance-blade in his shoulder — I near stumbled over his upturned face when something pushed me from behind. That charge had busted our cross-line of defense: there weren't any lines any more. Half the savages were unhorsed, but most of these seemed to me like they were making better war on foot — nothing except a tangle of striking men — of killing men — white and red.

So far, my own part hadn't been much to brag about. I'd shot when everybody else did — I don't know if I hit anybody — and now I was trying to get my rifle butt-uppermost in the jam. I was fair picked up and squeezed and tossed out to an open space — or partly open — and then I saw two braves heading for me, a few yards apart.

I remember thinking they were like enough to be twins. They were about the same height, and both had long, thin noses and straight mouths, and of course the face of each was barred with the same colors: vermilion and yellow. And each had a raised tomahawk. Next thing I knew, they'd spread out a bit more and begun

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to run in my direction: they were grinning fixedly, and it was a death grin.

A verse from the Psalms ran through my head — something I'd learned, years before, in Mr. Dobbins's Sunday School, away off there in peaceful Heliopolis, and, I might as well admit, hadn't thought of since:

“They compassed me about; yea, they compassed me about: but in the name of the Lord will I destroy them.”

What chance had I to destroy these two heathen? I got a grip of my rifle-barrel, with both hands, about a foot from its end. Somebody or other'd once told me that to hit first was to half-win any fight, so I stepped forward, swinging that gun. I swung it above my head — I crashed it down and across.

The one fellow ducked back — safe.

The other fellow tried to, but his feet caught in the grass, and it held him — just too long. The rifle-butt missed his skull — caught his forearm — must have broken it: even in that din going on all around me, I could hear the bones crackle, and he staggered, his legs bending under him.

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Before I could straighten up from that stroke — while I was bending to one side over my gun-barrel, the butt deep in the trampled grass — his friend was on me. He had me by the neck with the fingers of one hand. I was falling backward, and his other hand brandished the tomahawk.

I let go my gun and tried for my knife — my pistol. Couldn't get them! — Where were they? — Couldn't get them!

I stretched out my arms. I got his throat. I squeezed. Still, it takes a power of time to strangle anybody — as time goes in a fight — though it's short enough a process otherwise and death done before you know it. The blow of a hatchet is a matter of just a flash.

That tomahawk poised.

It was black against the sun.

I remember how blue the sky was. The sky, above shots and shouting — the dust-clouds and the battle.

I reeled.

Something cracked.

I fell.

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That's all I knew about it "of my own knowledge," as they say at law. When I woke up in a queer quiet (with a splitting head that the hatchet hadn't so much as grazed and that ached only from my tumble) a regular miracle had happened. I don't mean just the way my own life was saved — a couple of quick shots from Red Thunder had 'tended to that — but what was left of the Lucky Lot had been really lucky at last: we'd licked the Arapahoes.

To a finish, we had. Not five of those Indians who'd charged into the corral got out alive. Man-to-man — man to two or three men, part of the time — we were too much for them. Those who weren't killed ran — they ran helter skelter, and then the crowd outside ran, too. They were over the nearest rise already, and the fellows in our outfit who knew about such skirmishes said all the signs showed those Arapahoes had strayed down here on a feud with some other red-skins, got off the track, just stumbled on us, and only took a whack at our party by way of diversion, so to speak — staked all they dared stake on that charge. Now they were gone for good.

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If they'd known what a price we'd paid, they might have tried once more — and won. Half of our men were dead — Ike Wilkins for one, and what was far worse for us, Caley Jones and the other guide: I saw their bodies lying in a mist of green-headed flies on the outskirts of where the fight centred — scalped, as ugly a thing to look at as you can think of. Most of the rest of us were wounded, one way or another, though not many badly; the front rank of the attackers that broke through our lines had slaughtered near all our cattle, and here we were with the hardest of the Sierras to cross, winter not any too far off, and nobody to show us the way, and it was just about now that that way got pretty well jumbled up.

I was near Cap' Miller when he tied up his head and took account of stock. While I was holding one end of the bandage, Wickwire, not one bit the worse for the battle, strolled along.

“An' whar's that red hound o' this yhere 'dopted son o' yourn?” he wanted to know.

Red Thunder had disappeared.

We searched. He wasn't among the men that could

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stand, nor among the worse wounded, nor yet the dead. He wasn't in any of the wagons — wasn't anywhere about.

“ Sneaked off jes' like that thar Kaintuck' done,” said another fellow — a fellow named Flanty, I remember, who had his arm in a sling. “ Well, all I say is we're shet o' him!”

“ Run along with his Injun pals, I jedge yo' mean!” says Jake. “ What'd I tell yo', Miller? In cahoots, I tol' yuh. He's — ”

“ No, he wasn't,” George Powell said — and I was plumb grateful to him for that. “ I seen him shoot down a pair of Arapahoe braves as was bound and detarmined to git on to Frost.”

We didn't know what to think, and of course not many of the outfit cared. Everybody'd been too busy with his own dangers to notice much, and was too busy with his own troubles now to worry over mine. Wickwire stuck to the treason theory; some said maybe the Pomo'd been made a prisoner and carried off for torture, though there wasn't anyone'd seen the capture and it didn't sound what you'd call plausible. All I could

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do was remember how Jake had shown he'd do his worst for my friend if they both came out of the Indian-fight alive — remember that and hope Red Thunder'd get away because of it. This looked like he'd left me in the lurch, and there were so many horses missing that you couldn't prove anything by them: still, I'd rather the Pomo had cut loose and left me than been captured by the Arapahoes or hanged as a traitor by the Lucky Lot — and we all had to push on.

We buried our dead, the way such hundreds were buried along the Big Trail, heaping stones over the graves, to keep off the coyotes. We turned out the baggage, leaving everything except ammunition and such like as we just had to keep, to live by — the men grumbled pretty hard at that, and Wickwire led 'em, but Cap' showed it had got to be done — and then we stowed the salvaged stuff into two wagons drawn by the only oxen we had left.

It was getting well on in the afternoon when that job was done, but the trail wasn't badly marked till a little farther along, and Cap' had a compass. Besides, nobody, unless it was me, being low in my mind over Red

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Thunder, wanted to stay a minute longer in this valley than he had to. Miller was kind, in a sort of shamefaced way, but I felt as if I'd lost my last friend by the time we headed for the blue foothills and the mountains that soon began to rise rapidly beyond 'em.



CHAPTER XXI

THE WHITE MENACE

A MIGHTY sick-looking outfit we were. Those oxen must have been pretty well done up before the fight, and soon they were bony ghosts of themselves, staggering along with eyes like Wickwire's, their necks all raw from the yokes. The wagon-wheels had loosened so no tinkering would help them; they jolted the wounded that were inside, and the wounded turned delirious. The men who could walk, had to, and those on the surviving ponies often fell out of their saddles and had to be h'isted back. Any little thing was likely to start a mutiny, and I heard plenty of talk about deposing Miller: somehow, everybody blamed him for all that had happened.

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“He brung us inter it,” they’d say. “Figger how ye will, he done it. Arter them dead guides, he’s next ’sponsible.”

Jake was busy among the grumblers, and soon they were looking crooked at me again. I’d given up all hope of ever getting to California in time to save mother’s fortune and at least postpone the option: I wondered now if any of us would ever get there at all, but still, there certainly was no good in going back. One day, I told Cap’ freely my whole story.

“Dan-yel,” he said, shaking his blond mane like a big St. Bernard dog, “I more’n half believed yuh from the start-off — but what could I do then, with them ag’in’ me, an’ what kin I do now? Ef I kin haul this crazy crew through alive, I’ll hev done all the duty that’s possible.”

The trail got worse and worse, and I thought something’d gone wrong with his compass. The mountains didn’t get any nearer somehow, and the second day after the fight the only thing to satisfy me that we were headed right was our coming across Kaintuck’s body — or what it had been before the coyotes finished what, like as not the wolves from the highlands had begun.

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It wasn't a pretty sight, and I won't talk about it. There was an Arapahoe arrow between its ribs.

"So he didn't go east for my money that they thought he'd hidden," I said to Cap'.

The only way we identified the body was by the boots. One of them had the nick in it that we'd had such trouble over. Wickwire it was who pointed it out to us, with a sort of gloating, I thought.

Of course, this didn't hold us long. Everybody, from Cap' down, was set on making time, and we even began, that night, to do a few miles more — by dark and without any stars. We must have been borne too much southwards. Anyhow, first thing we knew, we were in the desert, and then the outfit was too sore to turn back: they all said no, we'd push straight across — go due west.

That's an awful place, the Great American Desert — nothing growing but sage-brush, chico and greasewood, with here and there a little scrub cedar. The rest is all stones and sand. What guided us was just the bones of men and animals and the jettisoned equipment of people who'd gone this way before us. Our wagons stalled: three of our wounded died. When we'd camp,

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it was in the middle of nowhere: we'd dig holes, one foot by two feet, burn pine-chopped sage-brush till its coals glowed, and then do our smokeless cooking. When we'd move on, it was always in a fog of alkali-dust that powdered our clothes, choked our throats and gravelled our lungs.

And when we came out of the desert, the luck got only worse. We bogged one of our two pairs of oxen and lost them — could just save the sick out of that wagon and some of the goods: we had to pack the goods on our backs and carry those wounded on stretchers that we made. In the wheels of the wagon we had left, the axle-spindles were everyone spliced. Ague'd broken out in the lowlands: it changed to some cases of pneumonia as we went up. The weather got cold, game and rations scarce.

I don't think I once doubted Red Thunder; but by now I'd given him up for dead. He'd been a good friend, he'd saved my life for the matter of that. I didn't blame him for running away when things got too strong for him: all I could do was to think he'd died somewhere pretty much the way Kaintuck' had.

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“Cap’ ’s crazy — plumb loco,” the men’d swear.

“We got to depose Miller,” they’d say, and look out of the edges of their eyes at Wickwire.

Queer enough, it was actually Jake held them back, just then. Looking over the thing after all this time, I figure he knew he couldn’t do any better than Cap’ was doing and didn’t want to be elected in Cap’s place till he saw a chance of success along that line: meanwhile, he had me safe enough — me and the gold-mine.

Next thing that happened was, our oxen gave out. For ever so long, they’d been wobbling along with their legs wide apart, their eyes hollow and their ribs all showing. We’d sawed down their wagons, but we knew it wouldn’t do much good, and we didn’t calculate they’d be possible among the mountains anyhow. So we shot ’em for food — which didn’t last us long.

Then we climbed.

There wasn’t any trail at all now, only what we thought were false ones, and the gulches got so bad we hardly ever could go betwixt the mountains — had to cross the shoulders of most. Colder and colder, too; we wrapped everything around us we could lay hands on,

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but near froze — stuffed grass in our boots, and only blistered our feet. The tobacco gave out, which was a real deprivation for them as depended on tobacco. The rest of our wounded had either got well enough to reel along on foot or else was dead and more or less buried. We numbered about twenty — twenty-two, I think it was. Sometimes we didn't do more'n a couple o' miles' climb or dip a day.

One night, when everybody else was asleep except the sentries, Cap' motioned me to him by the campfire he was lying beside. Over the snow-caps, away up above us, the stars were awful bright. He pointed to a bunch hanging to what I guessed was the northward of us: they looked like they were huddled together to keep warm.

“ See the Pole-star? ” he whispered.

After a little I did pick out the one he meant: whiter than most of the ones around it.

“ It's part o' what they called the Li'l' B'ar, ” says Cap' “ an' it p'int's to whar the north lays. Well, my compass had ought ter agree with that thar star, allowin' fer the variation — an', my Gawd, it don't. Somethin's gone wrong with the pesky pivot. We've been travellin' by

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my compass, days — an' now, Gawd knows whar we're at."

I asked what we were going to do now.

"Keep our mouths shet, you an' me," he says, "an' all of us push along as near west as the sun'll let us cal'clate."

But there wasn't any sun the next day, or the next — only thick gray weather that we couldn't clamber out of. And the third day, just guessing the west, I knew — we went up and up in a cold rain.

That night, when the sun sank as if it had tripped and stumbled over a cliff-edge, the way it always does out there — no twilight, but some sort of light one minute and deep dark the next — we pitched camp on the side of a mountain, with a steep drop below us and a steep rise, bare rock, above. A chilly kind of rain was coming down, so we got together under a ledge of rock and piled a lot of bushes in front of it. For all my troubles, I slept sound — but I woke to more of 'em.

The old Trail reveille boomed out even earlier than usual, and I remember I thought it sounded queer:

"Ro-O-ll out!"

I had to brush something wet and cold off my eyes

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before I could open them. When I got them cleared and tottered to the piled bushes and looked over, I knew I'd been covered with drifted snow.

Outside, I looked over nothing except miles and miles of it — and nobody could tell how deep it was. Everything, from horizon to horizon, was acre after acre of white. Waves of it — high and low — hiding precipices and levelling valleys with the spurs of their mountains. A whole world of winter — like the arctic regions must be — like the pole.

Our horses were knee-high in it, their bowed heads together just in front of me. More flakes were still coming down — and more, and more — and I knew that back of me was an outfit of men half-dead already, and half-crazy with all that had happened to them. Food low. Nothing but uncertainty for the future. No chance for fresh supplies. What was worse — if anything could be — nothing to go by now, and, if there were anything, we couldn't have worked our way through the monstrous, frozen breakers of that ocean of snow: we were snowed-in among the peaks of the Sierra Nevadas.



CHAPTER XXII

STARVATION CAMP

WE'D been headed over the side of the mountain, and stopped, like I said, in one of its short shoulders, maybe a hundred yards long by fifty wide. All across the back of it, the rocks rose sheer for seventy feet: there didn't appear any use trying to scale them for a trail out, because we figured that would only bring us nearer the glacier and the ice-peak sort of bending above us — and so into a worse fix than we were in now. At front, we saw the shoulder dropped away in a chasm you couldn't climb down at the best season. There were only two sides to the thing left.

“Volunteers for the valley!” says Cap’.

He was a sick man, but he continued to head that

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party himself — wouldn't let me go along, either. He had a lot of mistrustful fellows under him, too; Wickwire'd sowed lots of seeds of disruption. But he was still going to be their master.

Naturally, though, they failed. Westward, they found the chasm turned the corner and ran on past the overhead cliff. They tried back the way we'd come, but the weight of the snow had sent about a quarter of the mountain down and choked us off as right as if it was a jail-wall: we lost one man in a crevasse, and another fellow tumbled part way after him and was hauled up by a lariat, all smashed and dying. Might as well have looked for a particular autumn-leaf as a trail under that wilderness of snow! We didn't try anymore.

“Got to go in winter-quarters an' wait fo' a thaw,” Cap' says.

But we all knew what that meant. I reckon we felt like we were Northwest Passage explorers caught in what they name the grip of eternal winter, and, being off the Trail the way everybody guessed now we must be, there wasn't any expectation of a relief-party coming along to shelter us. Once winter started up here in this un-

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travelled section of the Sierras, it'd just keep on, worse and worse, till Spring — and by that time, where'd we be?

I said, away back, I still had my diary of this trip. Well, do you know what my diary says of the start of our time up there in the snow? After that first morning, it says, day in and day out:

“ Same as yesterday.”

You remember “ Snow-Bound ” that you have to read at school? It's been written since, and Whittier knew his snow in more sheltered spots, but out here it was like that:

All day the hoary meteor fell;
And, when the second morning shone,
We looked upon a world unknown,
On nothing we could call our own.
Around the glistening wonder bent
The blue walls of the firmament,
No cloud above, no earth below, —
A universe of sky and snow!

And that tells the story of it — only there was more snow every night, more wind every dawn — all the slow eating-in horror, the thing they call monotony, the

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every minute that's the same as the last, and yet worse because it is the same, and because there's no change in sight up to where you see ahead of you — and not so far ahead, either — when the whole thing's going to end by snuffing you out.

We built up the front wall of the place under the ledge, discipline getting more unruly every hour. A thin man from Ohio died — he'd been fat when we started — and we had to make his grave in the snow; the ground was just solid rock when we got to it — and we hadn't better luck when we looked for food. There wasn't any game; when Cap' sent a party to search a stream, break its ice and get some fish, only two of the three volunteers came back alive, and they hadn't found but a tiny creek frozen from surface to bottom.

More snow — more drifts. Pretty soon, we couldn't move hardly a quarter-mile, right or left — hardly an eighth, I guess.

“The Lucky Lot,” says Wickwire, grinning across his goitre, “they hev been safely conducted — to Starvation Camp!”

He was near right, too. Bad enough, the cold was so

STARVATION CAMP

terrible in the white emptiness: we were all more or less frost-bitten, and we melted snow for drinking-water. But after a while the last of our ox-flesh was gone. There was only that couple of half-dead ponies left: under Cap's orders, their owners drew lots to see which one's animal'd be shot first, and we smoked the meat and tried to eat it slow — men were detailed each night to stand guard over it, one at a time, where it was kept, out in front of our sleeping-place. We were everyone turning to skeletons, except, miraculously, Wickwire: he looked as if he still had some flesh on his bones, but then he said he was used to a hard life.

So the mutiny-mutterings came to be something near to shouts — ordinary daily talk, anyway. It was only Cap's courage and cast-iron severity — backed up, of course, by his sure-shot reputation and his carrying his pistol most the time in his hand instead of in its holster — it was only these things that prevented an open outbreak, and even they didn't entirely scotch the snake: just, you might say, postponed it. The Lucky Lot! Wasn't ever a train worse named.

Besides, all the time I got more and more worried

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about Cap'. That wound in his head hadn't been much to start with; but it somehow wouldn't heal, and now it was heaps worse. He didn't take any decent care of himself, thinking only about his job, and the cut festered more and swole up and looked mighty bad — times, his big blond face was all flushed with fever, and he seemed as if he wandered in his mind. Finally, what made things more dismal, the meat seemed to vanish of itself. Those sentries were too weak to keep awake: they slept on duty more'n ever they'd done when we were out on the open Trail. Gossip went around that somebody was helping himself to the stuff, and people began to look bias at Cap' and me.

“ We got to think up somethin' to git all hands busy,” he says. “ They're all goin' crazy else. An' then they'll begin to kill.”

So he set everybody to building snow-houses for themselves, two fellows to a house, where we'd live like Esquimaux, saving the spot under the ledge as a hospital for the increasing number of sick. That mountain-shoulder was dotted with such mounds: they seemed like extra drifts in this drifted landscape. Cap' worked with

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me, and we put up our igloo some way off from the rest and right by the cliff-edge, over the valley, hundreds and hundreds of feet below. Then he divided the Lucky Lot into watches to keep a wet-wood, smoky fire going, night and day, and never to stop their lookout — though we were certain nobody could any more come here than we could get away.

After this, he went into a higher fever than ever, lying all the time in our snow-house in a heap of rags, his eyes wild, his cheeks sunken, and his wound getting something awful. He did order the last pony killed and warned the men not to eat any too fresh, and George Powell to deal it out in the shortest kind of ration; but the fellows wouldn't pay attention to Cap' now, when he was out of sight: the meat made all of them sick, but they gorged, and they managed to argue somehow, quite open, that he was to blame.

This was the state of things when the final trouble broke loose.

I'd stopped my diary for something more than a week, but I remember, just before dark, trying to figure out what day it was and making it November 1st: so the

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Pomo option would expire by midnight. I laughed in a way that was as bad as crying — and I nearly did cry when I thought of mother, back in Heliopolis, depending on me and on me alone.

“Dan-yel,” says Cap’, in a sane voice, but weak, “come yhere, my boy!”

I’d been at the igloo’s opening. I went in to him: he was tossing on his bed.

“Dan-yel,” he said, “I don’t know ef anybody’s a-comin’ out o’ this alive — but I ain’t. I want yo’ to harken to one last order. Our crowd’s none so bad when they ain’t misled. It’s this fellow Wickwire’s misleadin’ ’em. Ef I kin’t help you, an’ thar’s further trouble over these yhere vittle-thefts, you do what I’d ought to ’a’ done long ago: don’ yo’ bother about nobody else — shoot Wickwire, an’ shoot to kill. Then mebbie yo’-all’ll hev some chance.”

He said that — and went out of his head.

I spent the whole night making him as easy as I could, but he never got what you’d call clear again. Several times, during the dark, I thought I heard a buzzing as

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if the Lucky Lot was in meeting: I was too busy to worry — it was just gray dawn, and bitter cold, when an enormous hullabaloo broke out.

I ran to the igloo's opening, but I was near thrown back. Here came about all that was left of the Lucky Lot — all that could navigate, anyhow. Some carried burning wood from the fire in their hands, and the light jumped up and down over them and made them look like hungry men gone crazy — which is just about what they were.

George Powell limped along in the lead. He'd never got over that leg-cut an Arapahoe gave him — he wasn't a bad kind, generally, but up here in Starvation Camp, Jake had won him over again, and now his face, half covered by a new-grown beard, was fair blazing. He slung me down across Cap's legs and put a foot on my chest: his other hand held a cocked revolver.

Cap' sat bolt upright — a dead person suddenly come to life.

“What's — what's — ” he began.

“The last o' the pony-meat's been stole — that thar's

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what!" says George. "We b'lieve this yhere boy's been stealin' food right along fer hissself an' you — an' yo've both got ter swing fer it!"

I saw a couple of fellows with nooses hooked over their arms.

"A fair trial," says Cap'. "It's jes' moonshine; but we'll hev a fair trial."

Then they all yelled together again. They all yelled:

"No more trials! — They'll talk theirselves out'n it! — Lynch 'em!"

"I'm still cap'n!" says Cap'.

"We've 'lected Wickwire!" they bellowed, and then again: "Lynch 'em!"

"Ef yo' don' come 'long an' git hung peaceable —" says George, and raised his revolver.

Kill or be killed: no mistake about it. Bill Standish was holding a burning stick over his head and close to the side: the flames showed Powell's face — showed all those insane faces 'round him — and the faces were easy to read.

"Not us!" says Cap'.

Sure-Shot Miller to the last. His right fist darted

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up, like a striking rattlesnake, from under the bed-rags.
He fired.

George fired. But only as he pitched forward and fell
on top of me.

Dead, he was. — I saw Cap' fall back, dead, too.
Then the snow-house was full of noise and smoke.



CHAPTER XXIII

WICKWIRE'S SECRET

THOSE fellows hadn't expected Cap' to have a gun in bed with him. When he drew, some of them flopped themselves flat on the ground — some jumped to corners. They left me wedged, face up, between two corpses — but that was for less than no time: soon as they saw the fight was over, they made a grand dash, all together, for where I was held.

They began dragging at Powell, to see if he had any life left in him — and to get him clear, so's they could collar me. Standish shouted:

“George is done for!”

And another fellow:

“Hold Cap'! Watch out he ain't playin' possum!”

WICKWIRE'S SECRET

Now they were lifting Powell's body. — Now I could just move.

I don't know how I did it. But somehow I wriggled from under and out to the side where there were only a couple of men. I bumped one over as I untangled my legs. I tripped the other. I circled the crowd in a jiffy. I got to the igloo's entrance.

There I turned around and looked back. Why? Because Cap's last order was ringing in my ears, plain as if he'd that minute given it. I'd had a revolver, of course, ever since the trial and the Indian fight, and I'd never let it long out of my hold since. I'd drawn now.

The crowd had all wheeled in my direction. Torches high. Arms stretched out. Clawing fingers. Dangling nooses, ready for business. Half-lifted pistols.

“Lynch him!”

But they'd stopped in their tracks. The way I'd seen Cap' do in the time of my first trouble with them, I did now — sort of moved by his spirit, you might say: I let my gun go slowly back and forth. Funny thing: it didn't tremble once.

“Go on an' git him!”

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That was what the men in the rear said. The fellows in front said:

“Quit yo’ shovin’!”

They were afraid of me! I didn’t want to kill but one — and I didn’t want to kill him only I knew he was the person to blame, and my life — mebbie a bit the lives of the others — sort of depended on it. That order of Cap’s: “Shoot Wickwire — then mebbie yo’-all’ll hev some chance.”

Face by face, I studied them, under the starlight, that funny blue light that torches under snow give. — Well, Wickwire wasn’t there!

It shook me more than if he’d sprung out, sudden, and fired. My hand did tremble then. They all saw it and made for me.

My revolver spluttered — and dropped. A lariat hissed by me — missed only because there was no space to swing it from, inside the hut. I ran for all I was worth. Out through the tricky gray of beginning dawn. Out into the trampled snow. Hurrying feet followed me — yells — shots. I didn’t know where I was going — didn’t look. Just by a sort of hunted-rabbit instinct,

WICKWIRE'S SECRET

I doubled this way and that till I found myself deep in snow that nobody'd set foot on for many a day.

A voice boomed up from somewhere behind:

“He's goin' over!”

One instant, it didn't mean a thing — the next, I knew what it meant. And it was too late.

Under me, the snow gave way and threw me ahead. I tried to throw myself back — couldn't. Grabbed at the air. Went down and grabbed at the drift under me.

That drift went, too. It went with me — over the cliff-edge.

Death, of course, was what I expected — death in that valley, ever and ever so far below: I turned a complete somersault — then shot straight down. But you can think faster'n even you can fall. I wondered if it would take long — if I'd be dead before I struck —

And I struck snow! Struck another drift. Couldn't have dropped twenty feet. And was waist-deep — with nothing worse, as yet, than a past scare to show for it.

I've said how it gets dark all of a sudden in those mountains; morning comes almost as quick, though not

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quite so, and as I was floundering out of my drift — mighty careful not to take another fall — the day showed me where I was and how I'd got there. Just the way we had a ledge back of Starvation Camp that we hadn't explored, here, below the camp, there was one — only a lot smaller: ten feet wide, perhaps — which the bulging-out snow above it had hidden from us that morning when we first woke up to find ourselves shut-in. We'd gone as near to the edge as we dared to, then; but the overhang of drifts had hidden it. Now I'd fallen right on to it — and I saw, and heard, two things that were pretty important to me.

First, I heard the voices of the Lucky Lot, up above. My fall had made them afraid to come anyway near to the jumping-off place; but what they said dropped down to me clear enough through that crisp air:

“That finishes him!” . . .

“Good riddance o' bad rubbish!” . . .

“Let's git back to Cap' Wickwire!” . . .

And next, I looked about me.

I'd struck tarnation close to the rim, so I worked fast, but all-fired gingerly, through the snow to the solid

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mountain-side. Well, just in front of me was a naturally hollowed-out place in it, and around from this ran a lot of human tracks in the snow that it didn't take any woodsman to see must wrap back, doubling the nearest corner, and climb to Starvation Camp.

All right: in the hollowed space, clear from the snow, was heaped that food which had been stolen from the camp. And going, cautious, along the tracks, his back turned, and never guessing but what I'd pitched clear over into the bottomless valley — there went Jake Wickwire!

This was why he looked so sleek while all the rest of us became skeletons. He was the thief that stole the meat — and here was where he hid it.

I took time to think. You'll remember I'd dropped my revolver, up in the igloo — and you can bet I didn't forget I hadn't anything now except my Bowie-knife. If I should run after the man with the goitre, he, being surely armed with a gun, would put an end to me in no time.

What if I waited till he'd got back to the Lucky Lot from this trip to cache his stolen meat? With them

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around him, he'd hardly dare to shoot before I'd said something — and what I'd say would be that he was the robber. He'd made no end of tracks; going and coming, too. My tracks would be all one-way. This was the proof — or would be.

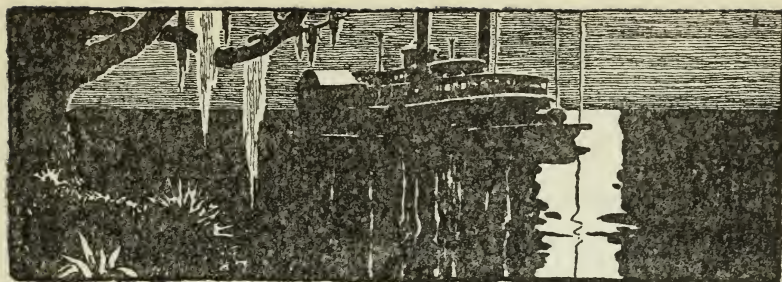
I'd wait — say, ten minutes.

And I waited.

It was awful hard. I put a thumb to the pulse in my left wrist, where Doc' Travers had held it when I'd had the scarlet fever, and I waited five of those minutes. Jake had long since rounded the corner — I never knew before what a century five minutes could seem. Then I waited five more.

It was over at last. I followed his footprints, being careful, though, to step beside them and not in them. I took the inside, because the ledge got narrower and narrower, and it made me dizzy to look down: I'd learned how treacherous snow could be on the lips of a precipice.

At last, I was on the east slope of the mountain's shoulder. — I was climbing that easy enough. — I was there!



CHAPTER XXIV

THE HIDDEN WAY

I THREW myself down in a snowdrift and peeped around it — Starvation Camp spread out before me.

The survivors of the Lucky Lot — Bill Standish and all the rest of them except the very sick — were in the centre, where the meat used to be stacked, and they were too deep in their confabulation to look out for any trespassers. Up above, the higher cliffs hung empty; in the middle of the crowd Wickwire stood, the rising sun and the campfire both showing his drawn face, his bulging eyes and his swollen goitre.

He was plump, of body, but the morning light from overhead and the shifting shadows of the fire, kind of

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leaping from in front of him, made his plumpness look to me as if it was more than human — or less: made him look like Beelzebub, and made all those poor, crazy, misguided men, gaping at him, seem like the Devil's own black angels.

He was talking in that throaty way the goitre almost always made him talk:

“. . . starvation? We did speak about that, some, las' night. Looked then like we mote hev to eat Miller er the boy, er both — arter we'd lynched 'em. An' why not? Meat's meat?" — I could see his crooked grin. — "They et our meat: to git what was our own, we'd plain hev to eat them."

It was frightful cold, there in that drift — but it wasn't so much the cold that chilled me. I thought about running away. Only, where was I to run to?

I turned my head and noticed, for the first time, how two sets of Jake's tracks kept on up the mountain-side, north, till they disappeared right into the cliff. I wondered why — turned back — and got my answer.

Wickwire was going on:

“. . . only now I've got a better plan. That fool Mil-

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ler, he never thought fer to look on up. But I hev! I wouldn't say nothin' till Miller an' his favorite was out'n the way — only made my discovery a half-hour ago, anyhow. It's made, though." Jake pointed right at my drift. I ducked, just as I heard him say: "Boys, since I'm cap'n now, follow me. All this yhere time, we been starvin' an' freezin' in open sight an' easy reach o' warmth an' plenty!"

They cheered — poor fellows, they so wanted to believe, that they would believe anything he told them — and the cheer, though a bit feeble, came toward me. Jake running ahead, they were all tumbling straight to the place where I lay hid.

I stood up — they'd sure see me, anyhow. I did remember about facing them and denouncing Wickwire as the meat-thief; but I knew by the way those fellows followed him that I wouldn't have a ghost of a show. So I just ran.

"Look — looky!"

That's what they called out. Perhaps some of them calculated I was a spirit risen from the dead. Most of them didn't, anyway — for they began to shoot. I felt

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a sharp stab in one shoulder. And I ran forward, blind and thoughtless, not along the tracks I'd come by, but — I guess just because his speech had more or less suggested 'em to me — along those continued tracks of Wickwire's that seemed to run madly into the overhanging cliff.

Then everything happened at once — and pell-mell, like it was all in a dream.

There was a big, outcropping boulder. The tracks turned it, and I turned — the Lucky Lot stamping less'n a hundred yards behind me. And then an easy path climbed the cliff, round-about, between rocks — and I climbed it. And in three panting minutes — shots still peppering stones and blowing up snow-dust around me, but none hitting me after that first little flesh-wound — then I came out on one of the lower crests of the mountain — the place Cap' had never thought to investigate, reckoning it'd be sure worse than Starvation Camp.

Well, it wasn't. It was a natural divide, like what I know now is common enough in those Sierras. There was a rock-ridge that acted as a wind-jam: on our side,

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below, the storms had let down their powdering white and blown it hill-high, from this side — between here and the peak's line of eternal snow — the winds were clean shut off and the sun had free play. That plateau, so close to where we'd froze, was as green as Maytime, and a clear trail wound northward, cutting the lower precipice about a mile off, and then ran gently down that direction into a valley all golden with the tints of autumn.

I saw this. — Then I saw and heard still more.

“ Zip! ” — A bullet from behind buzzed just over my bent head.

“ How! ” — A voice from in front called out the old Indian greeting to me.

Racing up back were the Lucky Lot, on foot of course. Racing up in front was something you've heard a heap about since, but that then I didn't even know the name of: a party of rough horsemen, spurring along that open trail. They were one of the first sets of Vigilantes in California — frontier citizens who banded themselves together to enforce the law till the new government could establish the law in its own right — and Red Thunder, in

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his old buckskins, with his face as calm as a statue's — Red Thunder was riding at the head of them.

They topped the crest and came over the plateau, shouting as they galloped. The Lucky Lot came on behind and, seeing themselves rescued, stopped their shooting. I stood stock still in my tracks for fear of being ridden down, and the two parties met around me — met and swirled the way cross-currents meet in a whirlpool around a rock.

Our men were near knocked out by the sudden change in their fortunes. Some that had kept going on their nerves fell over and had to be 'tended to — big, uncouth fellows — like helpless babies. Others hugged the Vigilantes and laughed and sung. And the better part of those valley-folk dismounted and were shown down the way we'd come, so's to carry up the sick from Starvation Camp. Red Thunder jumped off his pony, let go its bridle and stepped, straight and slim as ever, toward me: I all but fell in his arms.

Then a spatter of kicked clay and pebbles hit me on the head. Hoofs beat the earth. The Pomo and I pulled apart: Jake Wickwire had vaulted into the saddle of

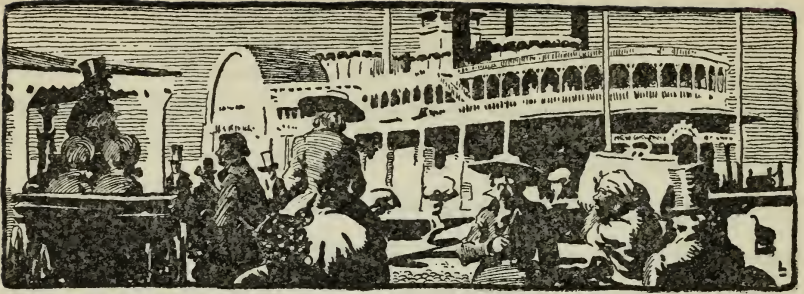
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Red Thunder's horse and was tearing down the trail into the autumn valley.

The Indian's rifle had been strapped to his mount. He did have a revolver, and he fired; but not the best red man could ever feel at home with that weapon, and they were all new to it then: Jake just wheeled, his goitre jouncing, and waved a hand to mock us. A couple of Vigilantes thought it was a horse-theft, and they shot as soon as they'd got their rifles — pop-gun work. By that time Wickwire was well out of range.

So, here we were dropped down in California — had been there, without dreaming of it, all that stay at Starvation Camp — and there galloped Jake to join Acker. I thought to myself:

“That option expired last midnight. Aaron's bought it up — been its owner now for hours and hours. His pard's done the job he was sent to do — not putting me under the earth, it's true, but keeping me away till too late. It's all legal; at least, nobody can ever prove it's not. Finished!”



CHAPTER XXV

POMO CLAIM

THE thing that Red Thunder had worked back there at the Indian fight was this:

From the interrupted row between him and Jake, just before the attack, the Pomo knew mighty well that Wickwire'd not rest till he'd killed him — or had him killed — as being too strong an ally for me, whereas, Cap' being friendly then, my life might be spared, if only Jake could someway else delay me till the night of November 1st. So, when once Red Thunder saw that the battle was bound to go our way, he dragged me off to a safe place — I was unconscious; couldn't be toted along with him — and then he plain deserted.

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Next, he did what it was impossible for him to do while we'd been as good as prisoners, and what nobody except an Indian could have done now: where he was once afraid to travel the Trail without a master, he set out back — went nights, hid days, lived, only the Big Father knows how, by the rifle he'd secured — till he got to the place where I'd been robbed.

Perhaps Wickwire hadn't the chance to dig up the money he'd hidden; perhaps he hadn't the courage; perhaps he was playing for so much bigger a stake that he just didn't care — anyway, Red Thunder's red man's craft found it not far from where we camped that time, and he brought it along. Then, if you please, he doubled on his tracks, trailed the Lucky Lot, found out where we were lost and snowbound, guessed how it was for us — and went on for this help among the miners in the valley below.

But he didn't so much as tell me any of this, up on the plateau when we saw Wickwire disappear down the mountain-side. No — that Pomo just said a few quick words in his own language to a couple of the Vigilantes busy with the remainder of the Lucky Lot. The Cali-

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fornians nodded. He jumped on one of their horses — motioned to me to mount another.

“Come,” he said. “We follow. Mebbie we catch.”

I was dog-tired and discouraged. “What’s the use?” I asked.

He shoved a revolver into my hand: that was his answer. Those horses hadn’t come any great distance — were still fresh as daisies; I rode after Red Thunder.

So we began our wild chase.

Revenge. That’s what I figured he was after — an Indian’s revenge. And, as we clattered down into warmer and warmer country, I took fire from the thought. I was plumb ashamed of it even then — I fought hard against it — I gave way to it. No good excusing myself; I just know that, minute by minute, with the softer breezes blowing into my face, that ugly passion got its grip on me. I wanted to overhaul Jake and somehow make him pay a little for all he’d done.

On we went — and on. The sun was high — it was hot. Only the flame in my veins — only this and the natural, what-they-call “resiliency of youth” — kept me upright in my saddle. Too late to revoke the Pomo

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sale, I understood; but not too late to raise some trouble for Wickwire and Aaron Acker — if we lasted. — On!

The little stones darted backwards under our horses' hoofs. Red Thunder's savage knowledge could pick out Wickwire's traces over the most travelled stretches. As we struck the western valley, the sun passed the meridian. Now we 'loped — now we walked — at chance streams, we watered our mounts, but only enough to rinse their foamy mouths — at one grassy spot, we fed them a bit. But we never stopped for long. — On!

Twenty miles along a fair track between trees ever so high, ever so massive — an old Spanish road.

Twenty-five — and afternoon . . .

We crossed a long plain of green sward. There was shade from oaks whose leaves were turned to bronze — and there were patches of wild oats all of five feet high. — On!

What wonders those ponies were! They could stand any amount of going — they did! Me — the sweat raced down into my eyes — and I tore a strip from my shirt with one free hand and my teeth and tied it around my forehead. Every bone in my body ached — I was

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weak from long under-nourishment — every muscle revolted — and I didn't care.

We never stopped to say a word to the people we passed — for soon we did begin to pass some: men, I judge, from south of the San Joaquin, following those gold-find rumors that came out of the Merced, the Stanislaus, the Tuolumne, everywhere. We rode through one village that hadn't been built more'n two months before, but that was absolutely deserted now: no pay-dirt found there, and news of big prospects up another valley, or across another range.

We came to a settlement where claims were being worked — had a bite to eat (how good that Irish stew was!) and learned how somebody, who must be Wickwire, had gone through only a half-hour ahead of us. There we changed horses, on the strength of Red Thunder's Pomo-word — some message from the Vigilantes — and, good as our other ponies had been those miners here gave us better.

That was afternoon — late. A little while later, the sun plumped down behind the trees on our right. — But my Indian knew the route: we kept on going.

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I was fair done up — had to throw the bridle over my head and hang on to the high, Mexican saddle-horn. But I didn't want to quit: the liquor of the chase was fever in every vein. By the stars, I could near tell the time: eight o'clock — nine — nine-thirty — ten. My nostrils were filled with forest-scents as we galloped along a road through a woods, the shadows jerking from side to side, — On!

Sort of sudden, Red Thunder let out a whoop. I'd never heard him do such a thing before; if I'd thought about it, I wouldn't have believed he could. I all but reined in.

“What's — the matter?” I panted.

“Nothing matter,” the Pomo answered. “Now we near my father-country.”

He fair bolted ahead, under those trees. I dug my boot-heels into my pony's flanks, hugged cruel tight with my bony knees — and followed, half a neck behind.

Here lay a straight stretch of forest-road ahead of us. We couldn't hear much, because of the racket we were making ourselves: but I thought I saw a shadow — a shadow on horseback — away ahead. I thought —

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Wickwire? — No — yes! — A bit of moonlight came through leaf-free branches, and showed him plain: Wickwire, knowing we were after him, and riding for his life!

Up went the rifle that had belonged to that member of the Vigilantes when Red Thunder borrowed his horse on the Sierra plateau. It went to the Pomo's shoulder — there was an instant of uninterrupted light: an easy mark.

Somehow, it made me sick to see. Firing that way at a fellow who wasn't threatening you — who was just doing his best to escape — Well, the revenge-spirit spilled all out of me, and the white man in me came back. I was close abreast of the Indian now: I knocked up his arm. The shot went wild.

That — and then I wished I hadn't. There, under the moonlight, Wickwire turned 'round in his saddle, without slacking pace. He drew out the gun that belonged there — and let us have it. My pony reeled — stumbled. Red Thunder's hand got my shirt collar just in time: he yanked me out of my saddle and threw me across his own. — On!

After that, it was a running fight — and no hits, for

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a while, on either side. I lay where I'd been put, every beat of the double-loaded pony's hoofs shaking the breath out of me, and the Pomo, racing right on, fired across my limp body. Wickwire fired back, but I felt he lost a mite of ground every time he turned to do it.

Then — like as if a shadow'd come across the moon — he disappeared. Just so. Looking around our pony's head, I saw him — and then I didn't.

It was Red Thunder's grunt, above me, that explained:

“Path join road — path to father-village.”

While he was saying this, we galloped into it. And a burst of flame came at us. Ambushed by Wickwire! All together, down went our horse, and the Pomo and me with it.

Sparks. — Dust. — A yell.

I was on my feet, right enough. The pony was dead. Red Thunder was stretched out beside it. — And here, out of the bushes, bulked Wickwire, coming at me.

Filtered through the trees, moonlight now showed it all. Jake evidently hadn't a shot left for his rifle, but he held a knife in one hand and a revolver in the other.

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I saw his hideous goitre — his drawn face — his protruding eyes . . .

Where was my revolver? — Dropped in the fall!

I just threw myself at him — used my body as a bullet. He tottered. A shot went off over my head. Man and boy, we clinched. We fell. I got his right wrist and twisted it. Another shot —

That's the way it ended — and just that quick. Bent back — I never knew how — by my half-crazy grip, Jake's own gun took his own life.

We carried him — dead — into the Pomo village, about an eighth of a mile ahead — for Red Thunder hadn't been any more than stunned by his fall, and Wickwire's bullet, aimed low, had only done for the horse. We passed a stake-and-rider fence and came to a kind of group of thatched adobe huts — “'dobies,” folks called them: all mud-bricks, put together without mortar. There'd been a bear-hunt; skins hung from tree-branches, and at a fireplace between two of the houses pots were boiling. Spite of all I'd been through, I never smelled anything half so good.

A big, fine-looking red man with a beak-nose and an

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iron-gray scalp-lock trimmed around an eagle's feather — sixty years old, I judged — Red Thunder's father, and he touched his own forehead first, and then his son's, in Pomo greeting, as if they'd separated only yesterday. He did that — and, while he was doing it, I heard a noise at the back of the village and saw — yes, yellow-faced Aaron Acker bolt away among the trees!

The answer? — Have you ever tried to keep a diary? — Ever tried to write-up that diary, or figure the date from it — after several days of letting it alone? There at Starvation Camp, I'd let things slide till I got my dates mixed — and here I was at the Pomo Claim, one good hour before midnight of November 1st — and Acker had seen he'd lost — and ran away.

In the year of '49, things happened like that — as strange and as quick. Once Red Thunder had told his story to his father, and handed over to me the marked money he'd recovered — it must have been half-past eleven — I'd completed the purchase of the Pomo Claim (which made mother rich, in the end, though there's plenty more story to that and many a snag in the way!)

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and assigned a half-interest to the Pomo. Naturally, I wasn't any hand at legal papers; but mighty few people were, out there in those days, and what folks call the legal technicalities were satisfactorily fixed up afterwards.

So there are only a few more words to say. We buried Wickwire, and I managed to whisper a prayer over him — I hope he got a better show in the next world than I felt like giving him in this — or than he'd felt like giving me. Aaron Acker I never set eyes on again, though, years later — 'long about '53 — I heard he'd been shot over a crooked card-game in Sacramento. And mother? If you please, mother turned up at the Claim, with a professional guide, less'n a month after I'd hired a reliable expert to get it working!

Yes, sir: she was a true chip of the pioneer block, like she told me before I left Heliopolis. Said she'd not been able to sleep quiet of nights, with the thought of her boy "out there" — so, the way she'd warned me she might do — she'd followed me, "travelling light," according to the instructions good old Hanby Henderson gave me. She left town the day after Judge Minchen was arrested on charges of defrauding another of his

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clients, and she'd made the frightened Judge — whose property'd been sequestered — assign his claim against us in return for mother putting up his bail! That was the price she asked — and got. Didn't I tell you mother'd learned a bit about business?

That's all. We settled down here, and we haven't budged since. "The fust woman mine-owner in Californy": that's how folks called mother. And they called me "a right sensible lieutenant — for a boy."

Well, being a boy's not exactly a crime; it's a thing a body can grow out of — if he takes time to it. So here's hoping!

THE END







